The DEVELOPMENT *of* ENGLISH HUMOUR

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH HUMOUR

by

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PART I

From the Early Times to the Renascence

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FOREWORD

This volume incorporates the substance of lectures delivered at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, on the Aberystwyth Lectures Foundation, during the Session 1929-1930.

Humour is not the privilege of any country or any time. In its broadest connotation, it is an aspect of thought, or an aesthetic category. The present inquiry is not concerned with that general object. Humour is essentially concrete; it has its roots no less, and more, in the originality of national groups, than in the faculties of the abstract human being. Its growth may thus be regarded as part and parcel of the moral life and mental progress of a people; and it is studied here as such. Even so, however, the question arises of the influences which that development may have felt from abroad; and the problem of the connection between Mediaeval French and Middle English humour has had to be recognized.

The history of English humour is followed, in this first part, only as far as the end of the Middle Ages. The survey will be carried to the twentieth century in at least two more parts, with a fuller

treatment, answering to a relatively much more abundant matter. The significance of the process, however, is partly exhausted with the emergence of completely developed humour, from the age of Addison to that of Lamb. The notion of humour explained in the first chapter, and upon which the whole argument is based, made it inevitable that the investigation should be practically restricted to literary texts. It is only in words that the duality of intent which we regard as characteristic of humour in the precise sense, can be aptly expressed. The diffused humour which reveals itself through art and life is commonly merged in the indiscriminate field of the comic—fun, amusement, drollery pure and simple, from which it is not easily distinguishable.

Modern renderings have been given of the Old English or Old French texts quoted, and those from Middle English authors, with the exception of Chaucer, have been modernized.

Very few studies bearing at all on the initial and early stages of our subject are in existence. On the contrary, the investigation of its further periods, and that of its general elements, receive much help from a number of books. It seems more proper to reserve a list of authorities, however tentative and limited, for the end of our task.

Our thanks are due to Professor Emile Legouis, of the Sorbonne, who has looked over our manu-

script and offered several suggestions; to Professor Emile Pons, of the University of Strasbourg; and to the staff of Columbia University Library, New York, through whose unfailing kindness the experience of a year as visiting professor in an American College has proved no less convenient for purposes of study than it was delightful.

February, 1930.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH HUMOUR

PART I

From the Early Times to the Renascence

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH HUMOUR

I. HUMOUR AND THE ENGLISH TEMPERAMENT: THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

SUBJECTS have their fates, and it would be vain to ignore the heavy doom that besets all disquisitions upon humour. The very word is enough to raise hopes which are surely and sadly to be disappointed. Shall then that single matter be excepted from the universal curiosity and hunger of scholarship, because to treat of it seriously is the unpardonable sin against artistic fitness, and to treat of it in a manner that suits the argument is to baffle the aim of serious enquiry?

Let it be our initial confession of faith, that the austere pleasure which can arise from the disinterested quest for truth, will prove enough to sustain us on our way. Indeed we cannot serve two masters at once. If our minds and hearts are lured away by the sprite that beckons to us, with an arch smile just showing on ever so slightly mocking lips, all is lost. Let us, then, brace ourselves up for the ordeal. We start on our pilgrimage, buoyed up only with the expectation to understand, perhaps, a little better, the origin

and the progress of a mental attitude, which has grown to be one of the major features of the modern British genius.

For our purpose is strictly historical; and this is another shrewd blow to the hopes which probably still lurked in the background of our thoughts. Speaking of humour as a pure essence, apart from time, one is naturally led to describe, to show it forth, from the wealth of the most telling, the most persuasive examples. The audience that does not relish the analysis, may thus at least find some comfort in the illustration. But history is our hard taskmaster. If the psychologist or the aesthetician has a conscience to save, what shall we say of the historian? There is no earnestness comparable with his. . . . The question is not here to explain humour, but to trace it through the stages of its development. Nor is this all: we are to follow that course, from the beginning, only as far as the sixteenth century, stopping short of the spacious Elizabethan age. This means that the matter we shall be dealing with must often yield but a poor reward for our labour. Modern humour hardly came into its own till the Renascence; prior to that time, the mental complexity which it requires was not very widely diffused. The investigator of origins has to make the most of mere symptoms; and the instances we shall quote may

on occasion seem rather thin. Moreover, a short survey of some seven centuries can but take in the generalities of the subject, with the support of few concrete proofs.

Still, enough has perhaps been said to chasten expectation. After all, there would be no excuse for the inquirer and the inquiry, if the special possibilities of the subject were finally reduced to nought. Such a disaster we are not quite ready to face. How could a man profess to treat of humour, unless he had his little share of a sense of it; and enjoying that common privilege—a privilege truly democratic—how could he deprive his audience, when the occasion arose, of the modest gratification to which they would naturally look forward? Let the problem be treated just plainly: it would be hard luck if the examples produced were robbed of the flavour that may yet linger about them. Beyond that, we should be imprudent to trust the assumption that a study of humour must somehow be humorous.

One thing has to be stressed at once. By "humour" is meant here, not every kind and aspect of the comic, but a province within that empire. Shifting and loose as the value of the word has undoubtedly become again, it was rather more precise and restricted for a period of time; and at the centre of its widened range nowadays,

there does persist a core of that more solid and specialized connotation. Upon this we take our stand; on that basis we shall persistently build. Are we thus at all straining matters, and running counter to one of those currents of language which it is wiser not to try to stem? The case, in all fairness, seems different. However commonly the word may be abused, the ground in logic and fact for the continued existence of its narrower use has not disappeared. To many, no doubt, humour is simply what causes laughter.[1] But to the majority of those who speak or write more reflectively, there is no humour unless a peculiar shade is superadded to the bare quality of the comic. One sees very good reason for not losing a distinction founded in the sense of a special aesthetic category, and, more surely yet, of a distinct psychological attitude. When the growing self-analysis of the modern mind, in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, produced the proper notion of humour, language in order to name it stamped an older word with a new value. The idea thus evolved was no illusion; and no development of thought since that time

[1] This is the view set forth or implied in the only work dealing historically with English humour: A. G. L'Estrange's *History of English Humour*, 1877; in the various anthologies of humorous texts; and even in most philosophical and literary studies of the subject, such as Max Eastman's *The Sense of Humour*, 1922. Mr. J. B. Priestley's attitude, in his *English Humour*, 1929, is substantially like our own.

has been able to blur the outline of the thing, even if the edges of the word have been worn out in common talk or unguarded criticism.

What that more precise notion is, most of us know clearly enough, although we may fight shy of the necessity to define it. All things considered, we should lose more by trying to run away from a definition, than we shall do by committing ourselves to one. Let us then say simply that we make a thing humorous by expressing it with a certain twist, a queer reserve, an inappropriateness, and as it were an unconsciousness of what we all the time feel it to be. This is a merely formal description; but form offers the safest way of approach to such an elusive spirit as that of humour. In the form, we shall see, much of the spirit is entangled, and to be caught.—You can superadd some quality of humour to almost every subject in that way; but needless to say the method is most natural, and works best, when applied to themes which in themselves possess more or less of the value called "comic," that raises laughter. This is why the humorist is primarily a man with an eye for the potential fun of life; but the fun in which he specializes is that which consists in being apparently impervious to fun.

A kind of mastery over one's feelings is thus among the conditions of humour; but that repression, that negative power is not of course

sufficient; along with it there must be a positive virtue, the shrewdness that perceives the actual paradoxes of experience, and the agility that allows one to think on two different planes. It is hardly necessary to add that the working of the method thus described can be interpreted in terms of aesthetic theory. A word as to those implications, psychological and philosophical, will not be amiss here. Why should we use at all that queerly twisted mode of expression? Because our instinct, then our experience and art, teach us that by its means we secure a whole range of effects: first, a special shade of the ludicrous, arising from the inverted manner itself, as every student of laughter knows; so that the comedy of life, thus shown forth, assumes a double, a richer, an intensified virtue, there always being more point in aesthetic enjoyment, up to a certain limit, when it demands our cooperation, and does not yield all its flavour at the immediate moment of tasting. Next, the trick of inversion is naturally bound up with a mood in which the stimulus of unexpectedness is cared for, sought after; the humorist joins hands with the artist who gives us the pleasure of a refreshed world; and just as the artist must take his stand upon facts as they are before he bathes them in an idealized light, the humorist reaps the benefit of his startling slyness through the concrete realism of his manner; the more objective

his picture, the more vividly does the soul of his subjective intent flash out. Thus the surprise of humorous treatment rejuvenates the commonplaces of actuality, and from its mere fun there tends to radiate the suggestion of a topsy-turvy universe. Now topsy-turviness for its own sake is one of the most profound desires, as it is one of the most soothing values of art and thought; it has always been longed for by mankind, driven and vexed under the iron laws of things; there is a delicious release in extravagance; and the deepest poetry or philosophy are thus gradually involved in the modest method of inverted presentment; they have an affinity with it, and flourish upon it.[1] With that ultimate background of humour we need not be further preoccupied at present; some aspects of it, at least, will claim our attention as we proceed.

More to our immediate purpose are the elements which enter into the moral attitude of the humorist. A supple sense of the actualities of things, and a command of his own reactions, are his major gifts. Now it is remarkable that these two mental traits are among the outstanding features of the English, as revealed by the original life and manners of their land. Let it be far from

[1] We have worked out this view of the subject in "Pourquoi nous ne pouvons définir l'humour," Revue germanique, 1906; reprinted as "Le Mécanisme de l'humour," in *Etudes de Psychologie Littéraire*, 1913.

us to suggest, that England or rather Great Britain has a monopoly of humour: other nations possess their full share, and humour indeed is as old as civilization. But it is no mere accident that a name should have been found for it, and that it should have first grown to a realization of itself, on British soil. There are reasons in the nature of things why the wrong impression should have been created, and often expressed, that humour was a birthright of the British. It is not; but they evince in their constitution a somewhat special affinity with the temper of humour. A sense of the actualities of things they have ever displayed preeminently; the concreteness of their thought, their "mental materialism," and that intuitive perception which goes at least some way to extend their grasp of the practical over the field of the spiritual, are justly noted characteristics. Again, their faculty of withholding the normal flow of their impressions, their cool-blooded taciturnity, the subdued tone of their outward life, and that reserve which stretches all the way from the captaincy of their souls to pure sluggishness, and to the fear of giving themselves away, have struck the foreign observer at all times. It would thus seem that, after all, the nation which first grew aware of the distinctive nature of humour was singled out for that discovery by a particularity of genius; and that to study the development of

modern humour in England, is to trace it on the chosen ground where the character of the race was to lend it the earliest and the richest fecundity. Whether that grace of nature has clung to the children of the blood, and followed them even to their oversea settlements, is a question that a little acquaintance with the United States and the Dominions enables one to solve.

It is a far different problem that will engross our attention through this first part of our enquiry as a whole. When did that special fitness of temper begin to assert itself? If humour has such deep roots in the very being of the English people, how is it that their earliest literature shows but slight traces of it? How can we account for its scarcity during the Anglo-Saxon period? And what interpretation are we to put upon the disturbing facts and probabilities, which seem to point to French influence as having most to do with the rise of Middle English humour?

Problems are indeed writ large over each and every period in the development which we are attempting to follow. The history of English humour falls roughly into three phases, each of which has its predominant issue to settle. The first is that with which we shall be concerned throughout this series of lectures. From the early times to the Renascence, the main point is to explain the apparent lateness in the growth of English hu-

mour, and to apportion their respective shares in that becoming to the two nations whose cultures and languages lived on the same soil after the Norman Conquest: England and France. The second period, from the middle of the sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century, shows us the word "humour" undergoing a process of specialization, which gradually brought it to denote the attitude of the humorist in the modern sense; and the difficulty is to follow that subtly graded change of meaning. The third period, from the beginning of the eighteenth century to our day, is the final stage; then it was that the word and the attitude were completely fused, and the self-consciousness of humour being achieved, individual variations upon the common theme had a free play.—Of the three main questions, the first is the most difficult to solve; our data then are most scattered, our impressions most tentative. On entering upon that piece of research, let us express a sense of diffidence, only too sincere and too fully justified.

II

Of humour, properly so called, we find very little indeed in the remnants of Anglo-Saxon literature. It has been often remarked that there

is none in "Beowulf"—a deficiency that will cause us little surprise, if we remember the central mood of the poem, the inspiration out of which it grew, whether the collective or the individual elements in the authorship be more emphasized. The tone is pitched in such a key that humour, it must be confessed, would have to be handled very adroitly not to sound a jarring note. The theme of "Beowulf" is high and solemn. At the present day that beautiful epic appeals not in vain to the idealism and to the pride of racial origins; and a halo of almost religious veneration has developed around a text, in which it has been not unreasonably surmised that the self-sacrifice and death of the Saviour may have been dimly adumbrated. But the modern mind is no less irreverent than it is sentimental; and in spite of all the effort lavished by scholars and by the authors of academic text-books, in order to make "Beowulf" the lay Bible of the Anglo-Saxon youth, it is undeniable that most students refuse to take it very seriously. Fine and grand as it is, its appeal is extraordinarily remote; its setting, its mental horizon demand of us an adaptation more difficult than is required for instance by the Homeric poems. And so, to one imagination that is genuinely fired by the tale, there are not a few that are tickled and prompted to a rebellious reaction. The number of unpretentious and not unkind

parodies which the student of to-day has grafted on the poem, is significant. . .

Meanwhile the learned specialists mount a vigilant guard, and enjoin us not to desecrate the text with disrespectful interpretation. The greatest "Beowulf" scholar, Klaeber, is positive in his warning: "In such a gloomy atmosphere there can be no room for levity, fun, or humour. Passages which to modern readers might seem to be humorous were certainly not so meant by the Anglo-Saxon author." [1] Instances follow; but strange to say, the texts as to the misleading appearance of which our authority is thus bent upon warning us, are not those which our own sense of humour might perhaps find most dangerous. The great scholar's feeling of incongruity is stirred by possible implications that remind us of Charles Lamb's remarks about the jokes of the schoolmaster. Other spirits will be led astray at other places. No less a commentator than Clark Hall finds a "grim specimen" of "unconscious humour" in line 1545, "where the sea-monster sits on the hero, and draws her sword" [2]; a grotesque image assuredly, did we not remember that those monsters in "Beowulf"—crosses as they are between heathen fiends and Christian

[1] *Beowulf*, etc., edited by Fr. Klaeber, 1922; Introduction, p. lxi.
[2] *Beowulf*, translated by J. R. Clark Hall, 1911; Introduction, p. xxxii.

devils—are endowed with half-human features and attributes. It would be easy to discover parallel examples—such as the passage in which Beowulf lying in wait for Grendel, the fiend is represented as much surprised at the reception he meets with. In a modern setting, the remark would have been hardly possible without a flickering smile; there is nothing here to suggest any such intention. . . . Or: "he" (Grendel) "became affrighted in soul and spirit, but he could get away no faster for all that."[1] . . . After Grendel's death, when the terror and the danger are over, we are told that "the older courtiers turned back, and many a young (man) from the joyous journey, to ride boldly from the mere on horses—warriors on steeds"[2]; and the fiend's mutilated limb being on view, "Many a retainer, valorous of mood, went to the lofty hall to see the curious wonder."[3] Here are boldness and valour cheap indeed, after the event. Only children would fail to perceive the inappropriateness in the situation and the words. But is not a certain childishness of spirit the very feature of the poem? The temptation is to be resisted once more, when the hero himself relates the final episode of the fight: "I could not keep him" (Grendel) "from going—

[1] Ibid., lines 753-5.
[2] 853-5.
[3] 919-21.

the Creator did not will it. I did not stick to him, the deadly foe, well enough for that—the fiend was too preeminently strong at going." [1] The man who wrote that had not the slightest twinkle in his eye.

Indeed Klaeber thus far is absolutely right. Of full humorous intent, we have nothing in those texts, or similar ones. All we could speak of would be "unconscious humour," as Clark Hall does; and the phrase—a misleading set of words—should deceive no one; the essence of humour is to be conscious, instinct with a purpose, even if the development of the hint brings out more than the speaker was clearly aware of when he spoke. To endow a person with unconscious humour is simply a polite manner of saying that he conspicuously lacks a sense of it. We are here indulging in a cheap sort of game, that of systematic anachronism; we are taking a leaf from the book of the parodist; with interpretation, properly so called, this has nothing to do; and to interpretation it is time that we should return.

The history of all early literatures bears witness that the epic tone in itself does not exclude an occasional or a frequent humorous relaxation; and we know that the joy of battle and the triumph of victory have often enough in mediaeval poe-

[1] Ibid., 966-71.

try struck fierce notes of mocking and defiance. Might we not catch in the earnest mood of "Beowulf" a momentary gleam of that spirit; and might not that spirit be set off by that sense of relativity, that amused expression through repression, which are the saving grace of a humorous intent? If we look at the text close enough, we shall find something of the kind; and passages in which the purpose of speech is pitched at least in the broader key of humour.

Ironical under-statement is an elementary form of the inversion which all humorists practise; tested psychologically, it is akin to humour, and the next thing to it; so near indeed, that a definition of the field must not leave it out. The trick of an expression obviously too low for the object, without any seeming awareness, on the speaker's part, of that error in valuation, runs through the whole development of our subject; and we thus have here one of its most central as well as most primitive roots. The manner agrees particularly well with the reserve of temperament, the distrust of profession as compared with action, with which most observers have credited the English character. It has been even possible to say that just as under-statement is typical of the English, that converse and equivalent trick, over-statement, or systematic and transparent

exaggeration, is a favourite process in American humour . . .

Now we have some under-statement in "Beowulf." It would much exceed our sense of reality to pretend that the following passages were irresistibly funny; but that a certain grotesqueness of inversion is there dimly sought for, and brought about by a conscious turn of style, is very probably no illusion. For instance, we read that "A chief of the Geats severed one of them" (of the sea-monsters) "from its life, from its conflict with the waves, so that the hard war-arrow stuck in its heart: it was the slower in swimming in the waves, since death took it off." [1] Here the irony is coloured with hatred and insult; and a similar motive peeps out in the remark about the fearful dragon, which determined to keep watch over the treasure, and, the narrator adds, "not be one whit the better for it"—as events will show.[2] A shade further in slyness of under-statement can be detected through the hint thus thrown out: "the Scyldings folk never used treachery in those days" [3]; or through Beowulf's scornful words to Unferth: "I have never heard such contests, such peril of swords related about thee. . . . In truth I tell thee, son of

[1] Ibid., 1432-36.
[2] 2277.
[3] 1017-18.

Ecglof, that Grendel, the frightful demon, would never have done so many dread deeds to thy prince, such havoc in Heorot, if thy heart, thy spirit, were so warlike as thou sayest thyself. But he has found out that he need not too much dread the antagonism, the terrible sword-storm of your folk, the Victor-Scyldings." [1]

The last instance is of special interest. What comes out in it, more clearly than in the others, is the kind of insulting intent which consists in a reminder, affectedly though transparently toned down, of unpleasant facts. That such scornful irony was congenial to the Saxon temper, can be no surprise; [2] we find plentiful evidence of the mood in Middle English poems where French influence is not at all conspicuous; and this is the sort of indirect statement to which relatively simple minds would first rise, the mental complexity required being prompted by the stimulus of fierce anger or hatred—emotions one naturally associates with a warlike race. It seems safer not to surmise that we have in these taunting words more than a germ of the modern "flyting" [3]—a

[1] Ibid., 583-96.

[2] The most typical example, with "Beowulf," would be the "Brunanburh" poem, in which the victors taunt the vanquished, and especially a traitor chief, Constantine, with ironical comments.

[3] The best-known instance is "The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy," —The verb "flītan" is of current use in Old English, with a range of connotation from actual physical wrangling to a rebuke in words; but the properly humorous sense appears to be of more recent date.

humorous exchange of huge opprobrious high-sounding abuse, a kind of serio-comic contest which flourished in the Scottish poetry of the sixteenth century. But we are on solid ground when we say definitely that such passages reveal the essential requisites of humour: a conscious restraint of speech, an appearance of unconsciousness that sets off a hint more forcibly; and a comic element, here resulting from the contrast between the actual meaning and the words.

Such tests are conclusive, provided we do not press them too far. A glimmer of indirectness in speech has broken through the tenor of the Saxon poet's single-mindedness; he has shown his kinship to us in one more respect; his soul, when all is said, was cast in a human mould. With all his primitiveness, there was in him the perceptible germ of the duality of meaning, which was to grow so luxuriantly in later ages. And that is about the nearest approach to humour we can find in "Beowulf."

The rest of our literary survey may well be brief. No one would expect any humour from such poems as "The Wanderer" or "The Seafarer." Of all moods, that of longing, regret and moralizing is the most incompatible with the twist of sentiment, of thought and style that humour requires; it is the essence of an elegiac inspiration turned to edifying uses to stake all on a

direct communication of itself; the suspicion of a double meaning would almost necessarily be fatal to its appeal. The same or similar remarks would apply to the bulk of Anglo-Saxon literature. It is very generally didactic, with a moral or religious purpose; and that is the kind of impulse which, if not checked or subtly qualified, gives thought a fixed bent, sets it decisively toward a plain downright manner, deprives it of its inner suppleness and freedom. Now the Anglo-Saxon mind, generally speaking, would hardly entertain two ideas at a time; and subtle qualifying shades were mostly beyond its scope.

Our search indeed would be fruitless, had not the "Exeter Book" preserved for us a number of "Riddles," in which a rather different range of interest is brought into play. There is an affinity, in the nature of things, between the method of the gnomic poet ingeniously working out his riddle, and that of the humorist on the formal side of his expression. Both hide their meaning, and half reveal it through cleverly contrived hints; in either case, the reader has to make a guess. The riddle can be too hard to solve; and there is ever a margin where humour overshoots itself, so that its assumed unconsciousness is mistaken for genuine. The pressure of their common aim drives the writer of riddles and the humorist to concentration and implication; with both, transposition is

used to an aesthetic as well as to an intellectual end. In a modest way, the transferred thought of the riddle-maker is a germ of the complex many-sided meaning which will play in iridescent shades over the full-grown varieties of modern humour.

That the Riddles of the "Exeter Book" are a joy for ever, it would be too much to say. The most successful, from our special point of view, are at best like puns, on a clumsy plane of inverted images instead of words. Some are quite fine poems, in which a powerful imagination is at play; but the pleasure here is of a very different order, and indistinguishable from that which we should reap from a striking description in verse. For our purpose of pleasantry, not much is to be expected from such jokes as the following,—the word being the horn of a bull:

"I was once a warrior armed; but now a youthful thane,
A hero bold, doth deck me round with silver and with gold,
And bended wire bows; sometimes men caress me;
Sometimes I to battle the willing comrades call. . . .
. . . . Ask what is my name?" [1]

That is mild indeed. But as we study the Riddles, we grow aware of some very interesting facts. To begin with, they do possess a vein of

[1] Riddle 15; translation by W. Clark Robinson.

distinctly humorous flavour; but this is not in their purpose itself, in the puzzle which they laboriously construct; it is in the choice of their subjects, in their tone and manner, and to sum up this aspect of the question under one phrase, in their popular realism. On the intimate relation between realism and humour, I shall have to dwell again presently; if the main root of humour lies in the most genuinely English temper, if humour is after all a growth of national and not of foreign origin in England, it is owing primarily to the realistic bent of the native English genius. But this is not all; the realism of the Riddles is often free, and at times quite strangely free, from the relative narrowness of scope which the authority of aristocratic and religious influences has stamped upon the bulk of Old English literature. A new spirit, racy, spontaneous, audacious, coarse, peeps out here from under the earnest edifying tone which spreads itself everywhere else to such a remarkable tenor of meaning and expression. It is as it were the revelation of another side—a no less human side, one we should have been certain to find sooner or later—of the Anglo-Saxon mind. Not only do we meet with a number of riddles on the most common objects of country life, and share in the sympathy of the rustic imagination with the dog and the ox, the hens and the swine, the cowhide and the wine

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vat, the onion, the leather bottle and the one-eyed garlic seller; but an undercurrent of extremely coarse suggestion—so coarse that horrified scholars have often succeeded in remaining unaware of it—runs through not a few.

This is enough to give us pause. The Riddle had been from the oldest age of civilization a popular pastime as well as a refined exercise of wit. Its fortune with the Saxons has been traced to their love of metaphor and allegorical puzzles—a trait they shared with their Scandinavian kinsmen. But good Bishop Aldhelm, a Saxon of the Saxons, in his Latin enigmas, had tried to make plain the spiritual meaning of creation by entangling it in a pleasant maze of ideas and words. We have here no such thing, only a frank intimation of what a popular appeal could be in this kind of literature. These texts are an exception in fact, but not in right; they presuppose and dimly reveal a whole background. The Anglo-Saxon poets thus find themselves eventually united in a common paganism of instinct with the naïvely impudent genius of all early literatures. They lose the doubtful privilege of an exclusively monastic inspiration, with which their modern admirers had been too easily prepared to endow them. And this brings us to what should be the chief, as it will be the final point, in this part of our survey.

III

It would have been not a little unreasonable to have expected that the mental life of the Saxons should have given rise to the most finely shaded kinds of humour. An age of civilization can only express itself in modes to which it is adequate; and all that we know of Old English culture from the time of "Beowulf" to the eve of the Norman Conquest precludes such a possibility altogether. The complete detachment from one's self, and the expert playing with one's own frames of mind, which full-grown humour requires, are feats of which the Anglo-Saxons would be generally speaking incapable. But they were not exactly Barbarians. Their moral civilization offers interesting features, and in certain directions of imaginative strength or brooding aspiration, they display a kind of refinement. To all practical purposes, they are the end, as well as the beginning, of a cycle in culture.[1] Intellectually, of course, they do not rise much higher than the laboured ingenuity of the Riddles. Still, it might not look at all absurd to credit them with the shrewdness of sense and the rough love of play

[1] The poem of "Beowulf" "is highly sophisticated and aristocratic, essentially a courtly epic. It was no wild outpouring of adventure for the ears of the vulgar, but an elegant entertainment for a royal circle." W. W. Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, p. 4.

which endowed other Germanic stocks, of approximately similar development, with at least elementary forms of humour.[1] The problem of their destitution in that respect has thus to be worked out in its own terms.

The most natural interpretation of the facts seems to be, that the negative privilege is more apparent than real. It is very likely that the Anglo-Saxons had their own sense of humour. Only it was not of the finest brand, and would not recommend itself to the more exacting propriety of the clerics who were their spiritual guides and censors. That the Church, through the Middle Ages, was always more or less in conflict with the heathenish amusements of the people, we know from many documents. In England, the fight began early—from the very first centuries of Saxon Christianity. The "joculatores" or "jongleurs," the heirs of the Latin mimes, soon made their way across the Channel from the merry fields of France; a sure sign that in the elementary love of fun the companions of Alfred were not so deficient as has been generally supposed on the single evidence of their literature. The clergy themselves were not above succumbing to the attraction of the gleemen; again and again, we find the Councils enacting that priests or even bishops shall not seek for relaxation in

[1] Both the Eddic poems and the Sagas easily offer instances in point.

the regular company of those jesters; and the prohibition is enforced by the Anglo-Saxon canons of Edgar in 906.[1] The jolly ecclesiastics could plead that by striking a bargain with the singers of levity, they tended rather to minimize the evil; did not the Church through those ages find it more profitable to join in the Saturnalia of the people on set occasions, the better to keep them within bounds? Words written by a divine, Thomas Cobham, in the thirteenth century, except from the general condemnation such "joculatores" as sang of epic subjects or recited the lives of the saints ("qui cantant gesta principum et vitas sanctorum")[2]; so that we are to infer the scurrilous jesters knew how to change their note, when the necessity arose, and meet the compromise which the Church desired half-way. All that we need, in the present instance, is to suppose that the Anglo-Saxons were finally more or less submissive to the authority of their pastors; and in view of the vividness with which they realized the frightful powers of the fiends, or the sufferings of the reprobate, there is much substance in the conjecture. The faint outline of the moral idiosyncrasies which were to characterize the English people at most periods in its history, and to reach their typical form in the Victorian era,

[1] See E. Faral, *Les Jongleurs*, etc., 1910; p. 21-22.
[2] Ibid., p. 44.

would thus be descried in its earliest infancy. . . . The supposition is the more likely, as the spontaneous effusions of the natural man need not have been expurgated or excised, through actual censorship; the free utterances of the sinful were simply not honoured with the treatment reserved for dignified themes; they were not written out, copied, handed round and preserved. It is difficult at the present day to imagine what loving care and patience it took then to save words that pleased from oblivion, to register them among the manuscript texts, that is to say among the classics. The more popular inspirations would be given no actual record, even though they were transmitted orally for a long time; and the monks who acted as trustees for the interests of literature, amending with a few Christian touches all the works that savoured too much of the pagan spirit, just ignored what was too low to be thus improved.

Are we then to set store by the impression that besides the records of the Anglo-Saxon mind which some lucky accidents have brought to our notice, there was a much broader range of mental life, and of naive expression, which has been entirely lost? The supposition rests on a solid basis of probability. The argument has never been put more cogently than by Professor W. P. Ker, in his remarks "On the History of the Ballads."

The ballad spirit, he points out, is as old as anything in humanity; yet our extant ballad forms can hardly be older than the eleventh century. "Where were the ballads before they were made? . . . An old civilization with an elaborate literature of its own came to an end in the eleventh century. . . . Part of the difficulty in understanding the former age, comes from the mere accident that so very little of its poetry has been preserved, and, in that little, so very much less of the popular unambitious sort. . . . But here and there in the earlier period we discover the same sort of popular tastes as are found much more fully represented in the later. There were the same comic stories; only, whereas the later Middle Ages got them in the easy form of fabliaux, and in large numbers, the earlier time has only preserved a few by turning them experimentally and as a sort of literary game into Latin verse. It seems a fair conclusion that the difference between the earlier and the later Middle Ages—e.g. between Anglo-Saxon and Middle English—is in some respects not as great as the existing remains would make us imagine. . . . . It is pretty certain that beneath the difference there was the same kind of folklore. The ancient Germans knew the story of Big Claus and Little Claus, they had the same jokes as the fabliaux and the Decameron, though by the literary fashions and conditions of their time they

were not encouraged to put these things in writing, and only did so occasionally and accidentally. Later, and mainly through the influence of France and the much less pretentious narrative forms of France, it was easier for folklore to get into literature." [1]

Those illuminating words throw light on the nature of our missing link. In that folklore, where stories that were later to become ballads, and humorous ballads, would play a conspicuous part, the more relaxed need of expression and instinct for literature of the Anglo-Saxons found a vent. How could they after all lack such an instinct and such a need? There never was yet since the world began a people wholly made up of prigs or of saintly ascetes; and the sad seriousness prevailing in the few Old English texts that we possess, does not mean that the whole range of the Old English mind is contained in them.

It seems thus possible, on some such grounds, to define the relation in which the Anglo-Saxons stood to humour. They were neither brilliantly gifted, nor quite destitute in that respect. Their mental equipment was such as rather to promise future fitness, than to secure actual ability. Like most early races, they would be handicapped for humorous thinking by the violence of their pas-

[1] W. P. Ker, *On the History of the Ballads, 1100–1500*, 1910; p. 13-14.

sions, and by their general incapacity to be detached from the urgency of their own feelings and ideas. Again, they lacked the supple intellect which perceives subtle shades of meaning and likes to play with them. They would be wanting in the finer varieties of humour; while the coarseness of their taste would make their spontaneous revels, their outbursts of fun, a kind of horseplay and rough banter hardly reconcilable, either with decency, or with that modicum of neatness and point without which humour cannot find its proper style. As a result, whatever humorous dispositions they may have possessed have vanished from their records.

But over against those disabilities, they were well provided with the stuff out of which humour is made. Their literature affords abundant evidence of that rich fund of concrete perceptions, that sensitiveness to the distinctive qualities of things, which is the source of a realistic frame of mind. The potential wealth of humour lies in the scattered evidence of vivid mental realization which most Anglo-Saxon texts give, and which the set habits of verbal rhetoric are powerless to hide. And if the Old English people had not the intellectual control of their inner life, their temperament was in other respects fitted by nature for the self-command of humour. Their seriousness, their very sluggishness, were nearer to the

requisites of properly humorous expression, than was or could be the liveliness of Southern peoples. It is a fact of common experience that the slow-minded nations have developed the most remarkable originality [1] in the field of humour. The actual possibility of the suspense and reserve which are the conditions of the humorist's attitude can be found in the still childlike brooding and wonder of the Saxon. It is not in the least a paradox to say that a sad and hesitating temper bears a greater affinity to real humour than does a light-hearted propensity to easy explicit mirth. It was not by their seriousness that the Anglo-Saxons were paralyzed as incipient humorists, but by the clumsy stiff habit of mind that they were only very gradually learning to shake off.

As a conclusion, it would seem that the mystery of the obtuseness to humour with which the Saxon settlers in England have been charged, and which is an irritating puzzle to their English descendants, should be somewhat dissipated. Those forbears of the people that have been associated more than any other with the individualization of modern humour, were not parted from them in that respect by an impassable gulf. They show us the promise, and the means; the achieve-

[1] One might instance *Don Quixote*—one of the world masterpieces of humour, and the *relatively* slow rhythm of the brooding Spanish mind.

ment was to come later. It took, for the promise to be fulfilled, the fostering influence of time, the action of spontaneous mental growth; and the stimulating and refining presence of the spirit which from the time of the Conquest was brought into such intimate intercourse with the silently ripening English genius—the spirit of France.

II: MEDIAEVAL FRENCH HUMOUR

HAVE the French a sense of humour? Put the question to an Englishman, and the answer, if quite frank, will betray some hesitancy, not to say doubt. The French, he will say, have rather a name for pleasantry of a different kind; and when cross-examined as to what the difference is, he will perhaps reveal the idea at the back of his mind. He will point out that the Frenchman has wit, drollery, satire, and all the brilliant manners of raising a laugh; but that all the tricks of his cleverness are conspicuous, just as they may be successful;[1] they make him admirable, and admired; but as humour they would fail, because the Frenchman's fun is explicit, and obviously self-conscious; you read upon his face the coming climax of the story, the point that is just going to be made; and when a man gives away the effect he is out to produce, what on earth could he have to do with humour?

That our English friend is right to some extent, we have no intention of denying. Indeed, we be-

[1] "French wit has about it a public air." (J. B. Priestley, *English Humour*, p. 5).

lieve that the main characteristic of humorous expression lies in its restraint, its apparent unconsciousness of value; and so the general temper of French pleasantry remains to-day, as it has always been, a little too explicit, in spirit and method, properly to deserve the label of humour. But we know from universal experience that such generalisations on national character are the most dangerous things, chiefly in what they pretend to exclude. How many exceptions do we not meet with every day to each single trait in the accepted notion of the Englishman, the American, the Frenchman? This is quite a case in point. Obviously, there has always been some humour among the French; more or less, as the mood of thought, life and letters changed with the times; at the present day, humour has become an accepted and a very prevalent manner of expression in France. As for the Middle Ages, it is no paradox to submit that the French literature of the period offered rather more substantial proof of the prevalence of that manner, than did the body of the literature in Middle English. Chaucer, needless to say, is the incomparable humorist, whose work both raises in its most acute form the question of French influence, and goes farthest to redeem for the English the primacy which they claim to have possessed at all times in the field of humour.

II

One glance at the records of life and letters is enough to remind us that mediaeval France had a prominently merry side. Of course, almost every quality can be safely ascribed to the Middle Ages. Shall we say that they were chiefly epic and chivalrous; or tragic and sombre; or mystic and dreamy; or again, quiet, happy and sane; or lastly, bubbling over with fun? Yes, indeed; all five separately, or together. . . . There perhaps never was a time, when the comic and the serious things were more freely associated. The tones and values of life, as will happen with a relatively new culture, had not yet been sorted, classified and assigned their proper places. However sad the world may then have been, or have had good reason to be, it thus assumes, to our minds, the stamp of a more spontaneous, a more unsophisticated gaiety. It could weep no doubt, and suffered incredible ills; but we feel that it laughed with a better heart than we do now. And the feeling, thus qualified, is not wrong.

Mediaeval French religion acknowledged the claims of mirth unreservedly. The churches displayed grotesque carvings, and jolly festivals were held in the naves. The sacred dramas and the epic poems left room for familiar episodes. The

"fabliaux" were oral traditions, before they were texts. Every city had its fairs, with the mountebanks and clowns, and a large supply of comic performances—"jeux," "soties" and "farces." It was in France that the "jongleurs" had their headquarters, enlivening castles and halls with their scurrilous songs; from the seventh or eighth to the fourteenth century, we see them spreading to Saxon or Norman England, and indeed everywhere. The "goliards," disciples of the mythical bishop Golias, were an even more significant, because a hybrid kind; truant and itinerant clerics, welcomed by abbots and monks, they cheered the gloom of convents with their jingling rhymes, and gave vent to a startling fund of irreverence and profanity.

Through the varied aspects of mediaeval France, there runs thus a broad vein of gaiety, mischievousness and fun, of a free, popular, rather coarse type; not hidden and repressed, but displayed; very similar, however, to that underworld, a glimpse of which we seemed to catch under the austere surface of Old English life. The mirth of the crowd is pretty much the same everywhere; one tenor of spontaneous merry-making, at all events, seems to have prevailed over Western Europe, in the cosmopolitan culture of the Middle Ages. But in so far as mediaeval France was concerned, how does the frequency of

that holiday mood help us towards the solution of our problem, her positive or negative relation to humour?

We must here face a real difficulty. We have committed ourselves to such a definition, that we cannot regard humour as coextensive with mere fun. Our notion implies an element of difference—a special restraint, resulting in some apparent unconsciousness of value. How largely is that characteristic present in mediaeval French manifestations of the comic spirit? There lies the whole question. Now, the test is a delicate one to apply; its working calls into play a factor of subjectivity, if not of arbitrariness. It may and will happen, that the testing does not yield plain results. The quality of humour is not always pure and entire; every intermediary degree can be found, as is generally the case with moral or aesthetic categories. Our impressions, in concrete instances, will often be relative; through a fine gradation of shades, genuine humour is linked up with simple mirth. The dividing line cannot be drawn accurately.

Let us suppose, however, that the examination has been carried through to a conclusive end. The huge volume of laughter-provoking words, shapes, gestures, in mediaeval French life, art and letters, is, generally speaking, too explicit to deserve the name of humour. It expresses the lighter-

hearted, merrier temper of the French, their greater susceptibility to the joy of living—that national addiction to gaiety which remained, as far as the eighteenth century, their main feature in the opinion of the outside world, and formed a sharp contrast with the English, who, as Froissart perhaps said, and the Duc de Sully may have remarked, took their pleasure sadly.[1] In the

[1] The famous saying attributed to Froissart, as to the English (who "se réjouissaient tristement selon la coutume de leur pays"), has so far baffled all attempts to trace it to an authentic source. It seems to have been first quoted as Froissart's by W. Hazlitt, in "Merry England," 1825; next by Rathery, in the well-known study upon "Les Relations Sociales et Intellectuelles de la France avec l'Angleterre," etc., Revue Contemporaine, xx, 1855; and by Emerson ("English Traits," Character, 1856)—in all three cases without a precise reference. M. G. Ascoli in his recent work on *La Grande Bretagne devant l'opinion française*, etc., 1927, p. 33, note 1, quotes the text with a very slight difference as Froissart's, and refers to Rathery.—Meanwhile a different source had been assigned to the saying by Mr. W. Gurney Benham in his *Book of Quotations* (Section: Historical and Traditional): "The passage is not found in Froissart, but it seems to be derived from the Duc de Sully's *Mémoires*, written c. 1630, as follows: "Les Anglais s'amusent tristement selon l'usage de leur pays"; and this assertion is substantially repeated by Mr. J. B. Priestley in his *English Humour*, 1929, p. 2.—The present writer has failed to find the text either in Froissart's *Chroniques* or in Sully's *Mémoires;* he cannot help wondering whether it might not have been coined by Hazlitt, who quoted much from memory, and who would have more or less unconsciously summed up in those striking words a well-known reaction of French observers to the apparent moroseness of English pleasures. Distant equivalents for the phrase can be found, e.g. in the words of Deslandes, a French traveller in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century, which we shall quote (Chapter V), or in those of Voltaire: "Le sombre Anglais, même dans ses amours, Veut raisonner toujours" "Les Originaux," III, XII). As, in a general way, from the Middle Ages, the French agreed that the English were melancholy (see further), it is

majority of instances, the handling of the comic is more direct, plain, obvious, than what humour can put up with. The facts, at first sight, thus seem to bear out the verdict of our English friend: the cheeriness of France, in the Middle Ages as in later times, was too easily exteriorized and transparently revealed, to be identified with the proper type of humorous expression.

Shall we stand by that merely negative finding? We keep our allegiance to our definition, so long as we do not see any necessity to alter it. But two things are to be remembered. First, we may agree that the light-hearted simple fun that gives itself away is not humour; but when all is said, it would be strange if we did not experience that the two brands existed side by side in quite a number of cases. They are not identical; but neither are they mutually exclusive. On the contrary, in some essential respects they show an affinity, and all things being equal call for each other. An eye for the comic is, after all, the best qualification of the humorist. We remarked that the most merry nations were not necessarily the richest in humour. That is true, in so far as they keep merry,

probable enough that Hazlitt may have thought of that national judgment, when writing an essay in which he gives the same appearances, on the whole, a different construction, and so been led to crystallize the French view in the so-called saying of Froissart.—Our thanks are due to Mr. Priestley, Mr. Benham and M. Ascoli, who have kindly answered inquiries, and given the help of their suggestions.

and nothing else. But life sees to that, and the jester has a thousand occasions to chew the cud of bitterness. As soon as the more sober and serious mood is induced, over a background of simple fun, you may have humour. That is why there must needs be some in the vast merry-making of a jolly people. From a mere consideration of probabilities, we can expect the broadest mediaeval farces to be often flavoured with a humorous spice.

And next, we should not allow the problem to rest at that. What are those other species of the comic, with which humour is linked up? It shades off, on one side, into the mere irresponsible flow of animal spirits, and popular farce; on the other, into the artistic and intellectual elaboration of comic points. According as they share more in the quality of one or the other, we may call the intermediate varieties "humour of release" or "humour de finesse"—there being perhaps in English no equivalent for the latter phrase. Even where France had not much of the central brand to show, she might offer us a good deal of those slightly mongrel kinds.

A word in caution, however, is necessary. The distinction which we are making here has been put forward, in partly similar terms, by an acute critic, whose remarks serve our special end, provided they do not lead us away from a proper in-

sistence on the element of consciousness which is an indispensable part of humour. Release, indeed; but along with release there must be some manner of restraint. The contrast which Mr. Edwin Muir[1] describes between the popular and the aristocratic humorist is a pregnant fact. It is true that in the course of time the former, generally speaking, came first, the latter next; and personally, one may prefer the earlier, fresher outpourings of the vein to the more sophisticated that followed. But the natural progress of humour was not its degeneracy; it became more and more tinged with consciousness and reflection, because its very attitude implied the seed of reflectiveness. To inoculate humour with

[1] "It" (Mr. Joyce's) "is a humour, too, in which extravagance is reinstated, after being banished for a long time as childish and contrary to mature taste. In primitive humour there is something outrageous, and the humorist not only discloses the foibles and indecencies of his audience, but flaunts his own, piling them up in a mountain and squatting upon it. This humour was an intellectual parody of the saturnalia. . . . It was a great emotional and intellectual release. . . . Later came the comic artist who in making his audience laugh retained a sober countenance, admitting no fellowship with the frailties and lusts which in describing he satirized or excused. This has been the fashion of the last three centuries, a polite fashion, in which the original flavour of humour was refined away. Comedy in this style amused men and made them resigned to their lot, thus fulfilling both a social and an ethical purpose; but it no longer gave them release. It was something different from humour in its first rude state, its means restraint and economy where originally they had been extravagance and grotesque abundance. Disregarding the fashion of centuries, Mr. Joyce has recaptured the boundlessness of primitive humour." (*Transition*, 1926; p. 40-41.)

thought and art was not to vitiate its principle; it was to develop it towards an inevitable consummation. Before there was thought in pleasantry, there was no humour. Falstaff looks thoroughly impulsive in his rollicking fun: while he is only so, he is farcical, not humorous. The humour comes in with the shrewd control over himself which the rogue manages to keep all the time; with his watching, and letting himself go only as far as he likes; with the cool judgment which adds a flavour of self-mockery to the absurdity of his pranks. At bottom humour is one; it always demands a background so to say, a feeling of relativity, another plane of consciousness. In its wildest outbursts, something still must be kept back. Even through the mood of the Saturnalia, humour comes out, from mere anarchy or indecency, as soon as there is superadded to the release a perceptible awareness, a feeling of something in the situation, the words, the gestures, that is meant, implied, not expressed. The succession in time which Mr. Muir emphasizes is thus simply the gradual refinement of humour. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that indeed humour can be over-refined, and refined away. The greatest humorists—Chaucer, Cervantes, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Sterne, Lamb, for instance —have managed to fuse and unite the two strains into one; to preserve some of the freshness and

raciness of popular humour, whilst pushing the elaboration and improvement of the method as far as they could go.

The distinction, thus qualified, will prove at once serviceable in the field of mediaeval French literature. France had much "humour of release"; but she had more "humour de finesse"; in this converse domain was her proper contribution to the common progress; there she was really a guide to European thought.

That she possessed an abundant literature of release is plain enough; it was just those expressions of a merry irreverent mood, which we briefly outlined above. The Middle Ages in essential respects lay stress on discipline and repression; mirth was then the outbreak of the pent-up forces; in it, the voice of the natural man would be heard. The various authorities of religion, chivalry, the feudal system, courtly love, were rejected in a mood of rebellion. The presence and activity of a similar mood we dimly felt under the surface of orthodox Anglo-Saxon life. Here, in mediaeval France, the revolt is patent, glaring. We have the texts, and can be edified.

In that literature of escape, humour is often to be traced. We find the outstanding examples of it in the literary kind that was most narrowly subjected to the influence and conventions of the artificial, aristocratic world: the epic. The his-

torians of the "chansons de geste" have pointed out how, gradually, what was mere gleams of irreverence became the very light of the picture, and the grand austerity of the "Roland" was changed into a mood of parody. We then have the "Pélerinage de Charlemagne," in which the knights vie, not in feats of arms, but in bragging stories and "gabs"; and we have the "Moniage Guillaume," the very soul and purport of which is the spirit of pleasantry . . .

The valorous knight, Guillaume d'Orange (Guillaume "au Court Nez," au Courb Nez, hawk-nosed), is turning over a new leaf; he enters a convent, and must needs be a monk. The abbot is delighted, although the candidate to holy orders, as meek now as he was terrible, proves singularly raw in spiritual lore. "Can you read?" he is asked. "Yes, but without looking at the book." No matter: he will be taught . . . He is tonsored in due course, and the convent is ransacked for a frock that will fit his giant limbs—to no purpose, as all are too short. . . . A monk now, and one among his brothers, he is in spite of all looked up to by them, to his own undisguised satisfaction, not unmixed with threats, should they dare treat him as an equal. Indeed the haughty overbearing temper will not be repressed. Complaints and grievances are soon heard: Guillaume eats and drinks ravenously;

when fed, he chases the other monks, and strikes them. His clothes take up a tremendous lot of stuff, the brother tailor moans. . . . The caretaker in charge of the victuals hobbles by on crutches: Guillaume has half killed him, has smashed the door of the food cellar open with a kick, and rifled everything. This can't go on: the abbot and the monks lay their heads together; let Guillaume be sent on an errand of danger and trust: he shall go and buy fish at the seaside. Should he be attacked by robbers on the way (and everybody expects that he will), he must not defend himself with weapons, but only use flesh and bone, as befits a man of God. Guillaume goes, is duly set upon, and, tearing off a limb from a pack-horse, kills all the robbers. He rides back to the convent in triumph, and takes his revenge on the monks. In another version of the story are some comic touches of a finer kind: on approaching the spot where the robbers are suspected to lie in wait, Guillaume asks his valet to show his pluck by singing, but the rogue's voice, for fright, chokes in his throat; as soon as the dangerous corner is passed, he wants to break out in valorous song, to his master's merriment. Guillaume finds, after a while, that he must not stay in the convent; he never could, he remarks, save his soul if he did. . . .[1]

[1] *Le Moniage Guillaume*, edited by W. Cloetta; 1906.

That is all, no doubt, pitched in the key of release and parody. Fun is poked at the temporal and the spiritual lords at once, in their awkward association and resultant clash. The jokes are none of the most delicate, and often verge upon mere clownish horseplay: Guillaume in his anger seizes the abbot, throws him against the prior, who with the impact is thrust against a pillar, and breaks his pate. . . . Still, an element of genuine humour is diffused through the whole. It resides in the perceptible consciousness and restraint of the narrator; in his relative discretion and reserve. All is not plainly said, much is left to be gathered from the implications of the text. Some of the comic at least is not directly presented. Again and again, the audacious and grotesque potentialities of the scenes, the characters, the gestures, the words, are hinted at, suggested; and we feel that the author enjoys them to the full, but he does not let himself go, and chuckles where he makes us laugh.

Other instances might be adduced. But the early development of the "humour de finesse" is more characteristic of mediaeval France; upon it we should dwell at greater length. Of course, there is "finesse" of some kind wherever there is humour. Was not the restraint that qualified the release an intellectualisation and a refinement of the mood? Conversely, there will be some release

in the texts we shall quote next. The distinction, once more, cannot be made too hard and fast. However, it is another temper of pleasantry, and a different aspect of the French faculty of humour, to which we now turn.

III

In this new field, we seem to perceive the working of a special affinity; and we are thus led to ask ourselves what might be, after all, the roots of humour, in the psychological and artistic temperament of the French.

The French are mainly—or are supposed to be—excitable, impulsive; they will not resist the prompting of their impressions, will give away their point in pleasantry. . . . But will they indeed? Do the facts often answer to that much simplified image? A modern nation offers a wealth of characteristics and tendencies; there is a Northern type in France, as well as a Southern; among the provincial figures, the Flamand, the Picard, the Champenois, the Lorrain, the Bourguignon, the Normand, the Breton, show various modes and aspects of coolness, inwardness, self-possession. Can we forget the potential humour in Lyons, where "Guignol" expresses a fund of racy ironical satire; in Bordeaux, where

the shrewd composure of the race need not be traced to an admixture of English blood? And even the much abused Southern temper, can be so strangely cool, and quiet, with sudden flashes. . . . The psychological possibility of humour is to be found everywhere in France; and more than ever at the present time, when the trials and experiences of an unmatched crisis have given the last touch to the sobering of centuries.[1]

But let us concede the point: the French, as far back as we can look into the past, did evince as a rule a more modest share than the English of the dispositions which we associate with the special reserve of humour. Still, failing the sluggishness and the self-command of the average Briton, were there not other tendencies, frequently or normally French, through which a spirit of restraint, and a method of indirectness, would develop in pleasantry, leading it towards the "humour de finesse"?

There were indeed; and these are the elements, native to the soil of France, out of which mediaeval French humour, or the main strain of it, did grow.

Of raciness, practicality, a realization of things

[1] A typical French tennis star is thus described by an American paper: "The great Cochet, languid, unhurried, the antithesis of all popular conceptions of the Frenchman as impetuous and excitable. . . ." —Humour is distinctly on the increase among the present generation of French writers.

—of the "realistic" temperament, akin to humour at the root—the French were never destitute. Some of them, no doubt, in all ages, were carried off by the eagerness of their logic, or the impetuousness of their passion; but the others kept their feet firmly enough on the solid ground of facts. There ever was a French shrewdness, akin to that of the British, though different; a special kind of clear-sightedness, with a tendency to shade off into an intellectual subtlety of perception—this being the bane, as we shall see, of French humour. The seed of scepticism, or even of cynicism, always grew and prospered more or less in France; and that lively refusal to accept conventional views passively, to take them for granted, was the spirit of much French mockery through all times.

But what matters more, is that the France of the past or the present shows us a rich vein of slyness—an untranslatable word, like the roughly though not exactly similar French term, "malice." Many were the tributaries to that general fund of disposition: the "esprit Normand," the "goguenardise," which crops up everywhere and assumes a different colouring in each new province, the hundred local varieties of the outwardly dull and secretly ironical rustic manner. And here indeed, the Southerner can be at one with the Northerner: his quick temper and his

bragging mood leave him his ready, sharp sense of the hidden flaws of things, his bitingness of implied sarcasm and satire. The French intelligence, in life and letters, shows itself gifted, from the beginning, for indirectness of allusion through mental agility, and the faculty of thinking two things at a time—of saying one, and meaning the other. . . . Now such a double intent, if refined and abstracted into a pure clash of ideas or words, is just what is called wit; but so long as it remains in touch with the concrete, is enough nourished with fresh direct experience, it possesses a distinctly humorous flavour. What we mean by "humour de finesse" is simply the brand which bears the mark of an actively analytical mind, and is thus half-way to wit.

Through another of her gifts yet France was endowed for some kind of proficiency in the wider field of humour: her writers from the first disclose a power of artistic restraint; an instinctive sense of the additional vigour which economy of effort, discretion, sobriety, impart to phrasing; and this vital intuition of the superiority of reserve in words would lead of itself to the implicitness which is the method of the humorist. There runs through the whole course of French literature a preference of suggestion to plain statement; "sous-entendu"—not only in satire, but in normal expression—is a national art. The

generality of classical thought and style links up with this power of condensed and virtual meaning. That pleasantry should be cast in the same mould was inevitable; and from the first, it was shaped by it. A pointed utterance would thus be sought, so as to set off the comic; and in this value of point, the Southern Frenchman would even possess a sort of inborn advantage. Now point, just like mere terseness, tends to concentrated statements, that is to say, suspended and restrained. In this way again, the spirit and the technique of humour would begin to arise; humour would be present, in the first degree, as a sort of verbal felicity, enhancing the effect of pleasant contrasts cleverly and discreetly presented. It would live and breathe, so long as it were not lost in an excess of elaboration and ingenuity.

Thus it is, that from the Middle Ages we can find, and do find in France, some national traits and tendencies that would make for the manner of slyness, closely akin to humour, which gives its distinctive quality to much satirical or comic French writing. The "esprit gaulois" of irreverence here merges in the "esprit français," and it is the latter which is responsible for those expressions of the national temper.

In this domain, it is possible to say that French literature, which developed first, set an example

to other modern literatures; and here it is that mediaeval French precociousness could quicken the growth of Middle English humour towards a more definite artistic realization. Chaucer, in this field, will be heir to the teaching and to the practice of France; only, the disciple will improve upon his masters.

Looking through mediaeval French literature, we find much widespread evidence of that latent spirit of humour. Some instances, in roughly chronological order, will not perhaps be amiss.

The date assigned to the two versions of the "Moniage Guillaume" is the twelfth century. To the same century belong the Fables of Marie de France—who is herself, in this respect of early humour, such a significant link between the two countries: a French woman, writing in England, she translated an English original, derived from the Latin of the fictitious "Romulus," into the apologues of her "Ysopet." Through the neat and fine turn of her French, there develops at times a note of unmistakable humour, which seems, when it is heard, but the soul of her quiet archness. . . . In her 96th fable, a scold has fallen into a river, and is carried off by the current. The labourers who witnessed the mishap rush downstream to seize her as she floats by; but the husband, who knows better, shouts a warning to them not to do it:

"Li Vilein lur a escrié
Qu'il ne sunt mie bien alé:
Contremunt la cuvient-il querre,
Que là, la porrunt bien troverre. . . .
. . . A sa mort ne fist-ele mie
Ce que ne volt faire à sa vie." [1]

That cycle of parody and satire, the "Roman de Renart," belongs again to the twelfth century. Although it seems safer, according to the latest views, not to see in it the anonymous product of a mythical folk-mind, but the work of a score or so of individual authors, it was the people of France who made the success of the "Renart," and gave it its significance. We find more links with England here: not only does the cycle show the distinct influence of the North, of Picard and Wallon writers; but the French texts have English allusions, there are English branches, and various English offshoots from the same trunk are extant. The spirit of the narrative, in many places, is indistinguishable from genuine humour, through its subdued manner, its cunning roguery, its slyness of allusion, its fine unconsciousness of the mischief implied. One might instance the

[1] The peasant did call out to them
That they had taken the wrong course;
It's upstream they should look for her,
Only there might they find her. . . .
In her death she no whit could do
What she would not do when she lived."

beautiful economy of effort and artistic restraint in the immortal "Jugement de Renart," where the obvious human, feudal implications, are quietly ignored. . . . The climax is perhaps reached when Renart, found guilty of numberless crimes, and seeing the fatal noose draw quite near his neck, is seized with a sudden itch to take the cross, and fight God's battles beyond the seas:

"El non de seinte penitance
Voeil la crois prendre por aler
La merci deu outre la mer." [1]

In the next century, the outstanding work is the "Roman de la Rose"; and if the first part, by Guillaume de Lorris, is pitched in a key very different from humour—a key of genuine moralizing relieved by lyrical freshness, by a dainty imagination, and much allegorical subtlety—the second part, by Jean de Meung, is one of the main repositories of mediaeval French humour. Not that the author's temper is not didactic; but his didacticism is aggressive, ironical; and being qualified by a strong dose of scepticism, leaves his mind that margin of freedom, without which humour cannot live. The humorous note in Jean

[1] Episode I, line 1388-90 (edit. by Martin).
"In the name of Holy Penance,
I wish to take the cross and go,
God be thanked, beyond the seas."

de Meung's lines is quiet, restrained; it is heard as an undertone of slyness and mockery, set off by the paradoxical, the unbelievable evenness and simplicity of the style. At the same time as the poet's face keeps perfectly unruffled, his tongue, so to say is just perceptibly in his cheek. The deepest essence of that humour is the feeling—or rather, a full and clear realization, untinctured with emotional bitterness—of the relativity of things; and its method is an apparent unawareness of the effect which a momentary heightening of the colour, a keying up of the artistic means, is bound to produce. Such is the potential comedy of the ravings of a jealous husband, in which there lives and breathes a perception of the ridiculous that goes much beyond what the countenance of the writer, if one may say so, does confess to; or the exquisite comedy of this curtain lecture, where a wife pleading for an exceptional measure of trust, which she claims to have deserved among all women, so artfully and artlessly gives away her point (lines 17,420 to 17,439, in Francisque Michel's edition):

"Ge voi toutes ces autres fames,
Qui sunt de lor hostiez si dames,
Que lor maris en eus se fient
Tant que tous lor secrez lor dient.
Tuit à lor fames se conseillent,
Quant en lor liz ensemble veillent,

Et privéement se confessent,
Si que riens à dire ne lessent,
Et plus sovent, c'est chose voire,
Qu'il ne font néis au provoire:
Par eus-méismes bien le sai,
Car maintes fois oï les ai;
Qu'el m'ont trestuit recongnéu
Quanqu'el ont oï et véu,
Et tout néis quanqu'eles cuident.
Ainsinc se purgent et se vuident.
Si ne sui-ge pas lor pareille:
Nule vers moi ne s'apareille,
Car ge ne sui pas jangleresse,
Vilotiere ne tenceresse." . . .[1]

The century of the "Roman de la Rose" gives us as well the satirical poetry of Rutebœuf; and while nothing is more French, how can we escape

[1] Ellis's free rendering in verse has made Jean de Meung, not inappropriately, read here much like Chaucer (lines 17,293 to 17,308):

"Other men
Speak freely to their spouses when
In bed o'nights with them they lie,
Telling them all their privity
As openly, to say the least,
As though they shrived them with their priest.
All this I know for gospel truth,
Since I from their own mouths, forsooth,
Have learned things many a time when fain
Were they, in confidential strain,
To tell when all alone we've been
The secrets they have heard and seen.
But you would do me grievous wrong
Should you suppose that I belong
To women of such sort, for I
Ne'er blab or speak unseasonably."

an impression that the true note of humour rings there again and again, in the sly roguery, the restrained archness, the constant under-statement; even if the humour is instinct with a definiteness, a neatness of turn, a clever epigrammatic elegance, which might no less deserve the name of wit? Let us watch the poet dealing shrewd blows, in his quiet way, to the much hated Friars:

"Humilité a bien grandi,
Car les Frères sont les seigneurs
Des rois, des prélats et des comtes. . . .

. . . Pour mieux Humilité défendre
Contre les attaques d'Orgueil,
Ont fondé deux palais les Frères." . . .[1]

The thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries were the great time of the "fabliaux." Of that characteristic expression of the mediaeval French mind, but not of that mind at its best, it would

[1] La Bataille des Vices contre les Vertus; ou le Dit de la Mensonge.

"Much has Humility increased,
For the Friars are liege lords
Of Kings, of prelates and of earls. . . .

. . . The better Humility to shield
Against the onslaughts of Pride,
Palaces two the Friars have built. . . ."

be wrong to say that humour, in the precise sense, was an essential element. The comic purpose of the fabliaux is most often quite explicit; here indeed is the proper field of the "esprit gaulois," and that is not an "esprit de finesse," nor a restrained wit. The coarseness is thoroughly impudent, and truth to say, thoroughly unconscious; the satire is almost always too plain and blunt to be sly. The spirit of the fabliaux is that of popular fun; in this connection again, one might speak of release; and it is but rarely that a humorous note can be heard, in the reserve of statement or in the duality of thought. Still, we have something of both here and there, and a diffused "narquoiserie," which occasionally crops up with an effect as of indirect presentment. Where discretion is to be found, it can be very efficient in its veiled implications. Chaucer will take more than a hint from the fabliaux; but how much will his art transform what he takes!

Do we not hear a ring of humour in the quick run of these ironical lines, with their even tenor, behind which we seem to catch a wink of the poet's eye? The theme is that of the deceived husband—a familiar one:

"Cis fabliaus aus maris promet
Que de folie s'entremet
Qui croit ce que de ses iex voie;

Mès cil qui vait la droite voie,
Doit bien croire sans contredit
Tout ce que sa fame li dit."[1]

One might quote as well from other tales: "La Borgoise d'Orliens"; "Le Cuvier"; "De deux Angloys et de l'anel," etc. But among all fabliaux the masterpiece in the field of humour is "Le Lai d'Aristote." There we are told how Alexander the Great forgot the pursuit of his ambitious schemes and the care of his glory in the love of a beautiful Indian woman. As his tutor Aristotle was warning him eloquently against her, she used her wiles and coquetry to put the philosopher in a ridiculous position of humility and obedience, riding on his back, and appearing to Alexander in that posture; when Aristotle had the wit to turn the occasion to the uses of wisdom, by pointing out that if he himself at his time of life could not stand the lure of a woman, and was thus put to shame, to how much more dangerous extremities of folly would not a young prince be driven?

It was only in the fifteenth century that the French comedy of the mediaeval type reached its

[1] Du chevalier à la robe vermeille; de Montaiglon et Raynaud, III, 45.
This fable to the husbands shows
That he in folly gets involved
Who believes what his own eyes see;
But he that walketh the straight path
Must believe, and no mistake,
Whatever his wife does tell him.

fully developed stage, with the great popular success of the "farces." But the appeal of those plays, mostly of the rough and ready kind, was of the plainest and the most explicit; and it takes a masterpiece, the "Farce of Maître Pierre Pathelin," to find a "finesse," a restrained economy of statement, a concentrated power of realism and ridicule, which are equivalent to humour in method, and very much akin to it in effect.—Comedy, of course, raises a special problem: dramatic presentment in itself demands that the provocation to laughter should be, in some degree, kept back and restrained, at the same time as it is put forth and stressed. There is an incipient reserve in the attitude of the comic playwright, since he shows us, not his reaction to his own characters, but his characters themselves. A minimum of indirectness, and so a minimum of humour, is thus implied in the very definition of comedy. But that admission once made, everything depends on whether the artistic restraint is reduced or not to that bare margin. The margin, in itself, is very little; a farce can be most explicit, if the author, so to say, seems to point out all his own jokes, and if the jokes are exhausted in the act of perception, so that the laughter has no background. On the contrary, the comic force of a play partakes strongly of the characteristics of humour if it is rich in implicit elements, which are gradually

realized and gathered. In that respect, "Maître Pathelin" is already an example of full-grown art: its effects are almost constantly potential. To say that it is very good comedy, and that its comedy is largely coloured with humour, are thus two practically correlative propositions.

IV

We should be in a position to conclude from this very brief survey [1] that mediaeval French literature can show us much humour of the finer kind; an intellectual and a literary growth the more remarkable, as it developed spontaneously,

[1] Only the fringe of the vast literature of mediaeval France has been touched, needless to say, in the above pages. Much material of a significant nature could be found in many other texts. See for example Mr. E. Vinaver's study of *Malory* (1929), where he brings out the contrast between Malory's unsuspecting earnestness, and the vein of humour in the French romances which he followed: "There is reason to believe that the French Arthurian writers of the Middle Ages were awake to the difficulties of their theme and possessed the sense of humour which Malory so completely lacked. Even Chrestien's attitude towards his fantastic world was somewhat detached: a smile played upon his lips and there were touches of irony in his subtle psychological discussions. The attitude of the writers of the Cycle towards the tales of chivalric magic is often one of scepticism" (p. 65, note). Again, the fifteenth century work of Villon might be searched, not in vain, for evidence of an ironical realism, with a strongly humorous flavour.—Still, enough has perhaps been said to throw some light upon the general characteristics of mediaeval French humour, with its two main types, one of which (the finer, of "finesse,") we find more interesting. Rabelais was to fuse the two strains into a wonderfully rich mixture.

from the promptings of the national mind, and its craving for expression.

Being thus very early in the field, at a time when modern European culture and modern thought were still mostly in their infancy, mediaeval French humour was able to encourage and stimulate a parallel growth in other national literatures—for instance, in that of England after the Conquest. How far that process of influence did actually take place, is a question that remains untouched, and that must be discussed in each particular case on its own merits. So far as England is concerned, we shall try to give a general estimate of the relationship in the next parts of our study.

On the other hand, as might have been expected, the bulk of the comic literature in France during the Middle Ages was of a type too explicit to come properly within a precise, and so a rather narrow description of humour.

We have thus reason for saying, that the literature of mediaeval France seemed to betoken the rise of humour as an important, perhaps a characteristic attribute of French culture. Although humorous expression played some part in all the subsequent course of French literary development,[1] it must be acknowledged that the

[1] A tentative list of markedly humorous French writers from the Renascence to the end of the nineteenth century would include

progress of thought in France did not justify that promise to the full. France so to say lost the empire of humour to England, as she was to lose her colonial Empire in the eighteenth century. If we inquire into the cause of that relative failure, we shall find that the genius of France, in the decisive transition to the modern period, from the early sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, concentrated on the rational study of man, and on the clear delineation of his general features, thus losing touch to some extent with the concrete and individual aspects of reality; just as the polished minds of Louis XV and his statesmen were to ignore the concrete claims of Canada and her "few acres of snow." Now, humour lives on the concrete; and its final development in England, from the sixteenth century onward, was to be very definitely based on its intimate association with individuality.

Rabelais, Molière, La Fontaine, La Bruyère, Lesage, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Beaumarchais, Balzac, Mérimée, Flaubert, Claude Tillier, Daudet, Taine, Jules Renard. Many more names could be added; and it is only in a quite relative sense that one may speak of a deficiency of humour in modern French literature.

III. HUMOUR IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE BEFORE CHAUCER

In the eleventh century, William the Conqueror and his army possessed themselves of England. His companions were the Norman knights and soldiers, of originally Scandinavian stock, who had been thoroughly steeped in French culture by their prolonged occupation of a French land, Normandie; and a number of adventurers from various provinces of France. The supremacy of the invaders was fully asserted in all the fields of political, social, intellectual relationships, and the official language of England for three centuries was French; besides, a close intercourse was kept up between Norman Britain and French civilization, in the broader cosmopolitanism of the Middle Ages. Meanwhile, under the surface of the aristocratic life at Court and in the castles and manors of the nobility, there persisted the repressed but still vigorous originality of the Saxon people; and how, when the two strands were eventually united, the homely stuff counted for no less, and probably for more, than the bril-

liant inwoven threads, is matter of common knowledge.

From the special angle of our problem, what interpretation should we put upon those safely established data? It is tempting to read them in the light of a simple moral opposition. The Anglo-Saxons were a gloomy people; at least, they are regarded as such. On the other hand, the Norman invaders were undoubtedly instinct with a lighter spirit; and it is patent enough that the Conquest made a difference in the atmosphere of Britain. From the first years of the fourteenth century, we begin to hear of "merry England," [1] and it is not only in Chaucer that we catch direct tones of her gaiety. The inference is then obvious: the Frenchified "Normands" brought mirth into England; the Saxon stock, reacting to that stimulus according to the law of its bent, produced the enemy of mirth and joy, Puritanism; a long struggle ensued, with various fortunes; and when after the spacious days of Elizabeth, in which life could still be sweet, the Puritans enforced their ascendancy, merry England was gone, although gleams of her joyous self would reappear at intervals. How English humour arose is thus made clear. If we take it loosely to be coextensive with laughter, we shall say that the Norman invasion was directly responsible for its growth, and that

[1] In the *Cursor Mundi*, shortly after 1300.

its modern development from the seventeenth century onward answers to the partial reassertion of merry England. If we entertain a more precise notion of humour, our point will be that its birth must be traced indirectly to the same cause, as after all there is no humorist without a sense of fun, and fun was a gift of the invaders; humour was born, in the words of a critic, when the austerity of the Saxon was fused with the mirth of the Norman.[1]

It would not be well advised to deny the soundness of the derivation altogether, in the face of the evidence that can be produced. But the simplicity of the argument, we hold, should be a good deal qualified and toned down. The process, assuredly, was much more complex; and it is not safe to link up those two psychological attitudes —humour on the one hand, puritanism on the other—with the distinct influence of either stock; nor are the two attitudes mutually exclusive, or even antagonistic. The mental diversity which runs through modern England cannot be, even roughly, identified with an opposition

[1] Floris Delattre: "Les Origines de l'Humour dans la Vieille Angleterre"; Revue Anglo-Américaine for April, 1927; p. 292.—The evidence that links up merry England with old France has been marshalled with special ability by Jusserand (*A Literary History of the English People;* Book II, c. II, V and c. IV, II). See also Schofield, *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer,* p. 323-326 and 330-335 (chapter VI); and G. H. MacKnight, *Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse,* Introduction.

of blood or race. We take it that merry England need not have been of Norman origin; and conversely, there is quite as good ground to father humour upon the Puritan, as upon the jolly liver.

We have reason to believe, it was pointed out above, that the roots of a pagan rough jollity were planted deep in the temper of the Saxons themselves; and it did not require the Conquest to make them laugh, although their untutored laughter may not have had an elegant ring. Was then the polished gaiety of wit, as distinct from coarse fun, introduced by the invaders? It certainly was, in so far as a more refined tone of living, thinking and speaking did spread through the circles where the aristocratic influence prevailed. But the spirit of a whole nation is not changed in that way; and merry England was not a layer of distinguished geniality, laid on the body and mass of English life; it was a mode or an aspect of the English people itself, in which the lower classes had their full share, and which seemed to rise spontaneously from the national traditions and instincts. If the England of Chaucer's, or that of Shakespeare's time, was in part "merry"—an epithet the significance of which should not be over-stressed—she owed it no less, and more, to the broadest elements, the popular ones, in her constitution, than to the derived and diffused example of a way of life communicated

from abroad. Neither had Puritanism to assert itself as a reaction against mirth. England long before Chaucer's time shows us the symptoms of that mood, ranging from a sober reflectiveness to a melancholy disposition, which radiates from what are perhaps the strongest influences of the British land and sky, and have stamped themselves indelibly on the character of the race. The inward turn and the preoccupation with a moral world, severely checking and limiting the appetites of the natural man, developed from within, as did the love of pleasure and of fun; the Puritans were neither more nor less native and national than the merry-Englanders; only they appear to have received more encouragement, after all, from the conditions and circumstances in which English civilization had to grow; and their relative victory was a case of a manifold personality organizing itself, when the time came for it to be stabilized, around what was in fact its most powerful tendency.

No doubt, there was in England after the Conquest a different atmosphere; a strong impetus was given to the civilizing forces at work, and the temper of what was to be the English nation was not the same for the change. Stress has been justly laid [1] on the Southern light that seems then

[1] By Professor Emile Legouis, in *A History of English Literature (650–1660)*, chapter II.

to pierce into the dark and the chill of a distinctly Northern air. That a more genial tone was thus diffused through the life and mind of the Saxon people, from the centres of Anglo-Norman influence, it would be futile to deny; and that a sense of readier pleasantry was an aspect of the mood thus gradually awakened, is highly probable. This greater liveliness of disposition would create a more vivid susceptibility to the claims of the comic, and so, some affinity, at least, with the frame of mind from which humour can be born. But we must remember, first, that this argument has reference to the broad condition of humour, not to humour itself; a mirth-loving person is not necessarily, in our view, a humorous one; and next, that the most indisputable symptoms of the bent which the English character, then in the crucible, was taking, reveal the persistent strength of a serious and indeed a self-centered and brooding propensity. The mental bias which was to result in Puritanism is perceptible from the earliest period of the English Middle Ages; and the Conquest, while it gave opposite germs their chance, was powerless to sterilize the seeds from which Lollardism eventually developed. On the soil which the invasion of French culture had fertilized, Wyclif and Langland grew by the side of Chaucer; and it was in the fourteenth century that, from the long

and hostile contact of the two nations[1] on the ravaged fields of France, there began to grow in the mind of the more Southern people a dim notion of the other's moral being, as a personality characterized by a stubborn, sad, fierce doggedness of silent purpose.

The image of a nation which is reflected in the eyes of its foreign observers may not be an ideal index to its genuine self; there are national idiosyncrasies in the judgment thus passed, as there are in the reality that is being judged. Still, the idea of the English temper that was stamped upon the French by the repeated contacts of the Hundred Years' War is no negligible test of what that temper may have been in effect. England had no nearer neighbour than France, and none with whose life she then was, for better or for worse, more intimately associated. Now the French view of the English character, as seen by Froissart and his contemporaries, is a fairly vivid and distinct outline, in which cheerfulness has no apparent share.[2] The merry-making of the

[1] See M. G. Ascoli, *La Grande-Bretagne devant l'opinion française, depuis la Guerre de Cent Ans jusqu'à la fin du XVI*^{eme} *siècle*, 1927; p. 37-48.

[2] Mr. J. B. Priestley, in *English Humour* (p. 1-5) points out that the foreigners have most often failed to perceive the humorous flavour that is diffused through the life, words, manners of the British, and so have much exaggerated the moroseness of their character. Whatever one may think as to the latter point, the argument decidedly bears out our contention, that whether in the distant or near past, there ever

English people, if we are to trust those witnesses, seems to have been mostly of the practical order, and to have consisted chiefly in good eating, hard drinking, and a robust attachment to creature comforts. All the other traits are rather serious, and more often than not show a kind of harshness. The British, we gather from the documents of the time, are a proud and a warlike race, with a fierce disposition; they are not so subtle mentally as the French, and can be cheated easily enough; but their shrewd sense of reality stands them in good stead, and somehow they manage to make good in the end. Used as they are to victory, they like to wage war upon the foreigner, whom they despise. Strong men they are and valiant soldiers, but unsettled in their plans, and fickle in their moods; it is dangerous to rely upon them. Their land is wealthy, and their trade prosperous; but they cherish susceptible notions of their own rights, and are jealous of their kings. Their thoughts are self-centered; they evince a pessimistic or saturnine turn, and believe more readily what is evil than what is good.

That in such a moral physiognomy, where an average is struck, the combative features should be emphasized, is only too natural, at a time when France was feeling the aggressive power of the

was a marked difference between English humour and plain visible gaiety.

English. Still, the impression thus created was not to be easily effaced, and in spite of the urgent motives which made him a political friend of England, Sully two centuries later was to express a substantially similar judgment.[1] We are not to forget, on the other hand, that Froissart draws a distinction between the two main classes of English society: the temper of the aristocracy, he points out, is not the same as that of the common people.[2] Yet, it may be safely taken for granted that the above outline is fairly accurate, as a sketch of at least the more external aspects of a collective personality.[3] What the moral being thus delineated would be in itself, and how it would appear in its own self-realization, are different and more difficult problems. It is possible

[1] Sully, *Mémoires*, livre XIV; 1822 edition, vol. III, p. 322-23.

[2] *Chroniques*, edit. by Siméon Luce, vol. I, p. 214.

[3] Not much store is, of course, to be set here by the more satirical aspect of the popular French judgment as to the English and their ways. Studying "La Paix aux Anglais," a farce of the thirteenth century, M. Faral has described it as one of "la série extrêmement abondante des compositions satiriques dirigées par les gens de France contre ceux d'Angleterre. L'orgueil de ces derniers était proverbial, et on se plaisait à le mortifier. On disait qu'ils étaient ivrognes et menteurs; on les plaisantait sur l'origine de leur nom; on prétendait (moquerie qui les exaspérait) qu'ils étaient *coués*, c'est-à-dire munis d'une queue; enfin, on s'amusait à tourner en ridicule leur façon vicieuse de parler le français." E. Faral, *Mimes Français du XIII^{ième} siècle*, p. 34.—The converse ridicule of the French by the English was never wanting; but there is some ground to say that it developed chiefly after 1400. Till about that time, the French, who felt superior in culture, and were more precocious in sharpness of wit as in national feeling, had most of the satire in their hands. Agincourt decidedly turned the scales.

to say, however, that such a character must find its inner support in some energetic purpose and a tension of the will, so that the fickleness charged upon it by foreign onlookers should be rather interpreted as the shifting adaptation of a realistic, utilitarian instinct to varying conditions; and that its thoughts and feelings must be steeped in a habitual sense of the urgency of daily things and the difficulties of conduct. The tone of life that would ensue would be more subdued and inward, with a serious and slow, almost a melancholy hue, than it would be light and bright, expansive and gay.

A tinge of sadness, indeed, was already the most frequent and most characteristic hue of a national temper, upon which the inevitable alternation of sunshine and shade, of confident and active or diffident and pensive moods, would play as it does in all countries and at all times. A serious sober disposition was settling as a permanent habit upon the most typical Englishman; and that preoccupation with moral issues, engrossing the energy which other races spared for amusement or pleasure, took the form of a potential, an incipient puritanism. The literature in Middle English gives on this point decisive evidence; to one Chaucer,[1] and to a few minds who through

[1] It should not be forgotten that Chaucer himself was very far from indifferent to moral issues.

their expressions appear as more or less of a Chaucerian turn, we find an overwhelming number of personalities whose main bent is towards meditation or doctrine.

Those remarks would appear to restrict within narrow bounds the field of possibility open to humour in mediaeval England. But English humour has not only flourished on the psychological set of tendencies which might seem to be demanded by its superficial affinities with laughter. The argument that humour being somehow akin to mirth, only a merry bent of character will favour humorous expression, is found wanting by the crucial test of England. A study of Middle English literature bears out the proposition, that into the complex product which humour is, there entered very often, and to tell the truth more often, mental qualities that might have been thought alien to mere amusement, or hardly reconcilable with it.

If we look at the problem in itself, we shall be led to understand easily enough an association that is paradoxical at first sight. Just as the French found in their faculty of slyness and artistic restraint the means of an indirect and implicit phrasing which possessed all the value of humorous expression, the English developed an approach to humour, the approach most easy and congenial to many of them, in the reserve and

self-control which a habit of inward brooding would nurse. Under-statement was the soul of the few instances of elementary humour which we discovered in Anglo-Saxon literature. Now there is a touch of sadness in chronic under-statement; it betokens a sort of depression. Let only the manner grow somehow conscious, and lend itself to intentional use with a view to the consequent effect, and you have humour. Or to put it more broadly: the humorist deals in self-restraint; so does the Puritan; and the modes of the restraint are not of course identical; but that there is an analogy and a natural passage from one to the other, is undeniable. The humorist has a shrewd sense of the concrete realities of experience; the Puritan cherishes a vivid inner realization of the natural man—of passion, desire, instinct, as the stubborn facts with which conduct must deal; he watches himself keenly, and history shows that he no less keenly watches everything else. The outside world being the field open to conduct, he sets a mighty store by the knowledge and the command of the outside world, and so the outside world is commonly given unto him. Humour essentially consists in a duality of meaning; and the serious reflective disposition of the English character, as it evolved to its final shape in the period between the Conquest and the Renascence, laid so to say a background of serious pen-

siveness behind the more external and superficial mood of everyday. The presence of that background would produce effects similar to those which were created elsewhere by the intellectual sense of the relativity of things, or by the sly purposive disguising of one's thought. Here again, the affinity would not work, unless a more positive inducement were superadded; the Puritan would not necessarily be a humorist; as often as not, more often than not, he was not one; but let only the spark of self-criticism or self-detachment flash out, and his stiffened mood be enough relaxed to play momentarily with itself: the deepening of consciousness which a moral meditation of life had induced, might spontaneously act in the same way as a duality of meaning.

In fact, and whether a puritanic temper be actually congenial to humour, or only not uncongenial, mediaeval English humour developed most often in personalities which were of a moralizing turn. It was not from "merry England" that the most normal type of humour grew; the jokes of merry England were perhaps better jokes, as they came more naturally; but for that very reason, the jokers cared less to assume the indirectness of humorous intent, and they are less certainly included within the definition of our subject. Chaucer is perhaps the outstanding ex-

ception; enough by himself, as art goes, to outweigh a world of contrary evidence; but our main concern is not art, it is the psychology of English humour. Surveying the field as a whole, one sees mostly writers who found their way to humour along a rather different track. Their humour was mostly inferior to his; but they were humorists still, and quite as significant individually; in the mass, more significant and typical. Out of the national synthesis in the making, the more average and normal English humour drew to itself such elements as it could feed upon; and what elements would it draw, but such as, not being inassimilable, were most abundant? English humour is not a thing that grew apart; it is an aspect of the progress of the English mind; and the central organization of that mind controlled that of every one of its aspects. Even puritanism entered into the mixture, since puritanism was there, and could not possibly be ignored. We shall be sufficiently mindful of the diffused French influence which we acknowledged, if we say that the example of French slyness and point may have been often the magnetism that called the liveliness of fancy into play, and awoke in the Puritan the glimmer of intuitive sense, out of which the full grace of humour grew.[1]

[1] That view of humour as rooted no less, and more, in the seriousness, than in the fun and high spirits, of the English temperament,

II

Humour in Middle English literature before Chaucer offers to us various modes and degrees of adaptation between the national temperament, then being shaped, and the humorous method, which we defined as slyness and indirectness of statement with an artistic or at least a conscious intent. Whether the instinct for slyness was of French origin, representing the contribution of a more sophisticated culture, or was rooted in the

may claim support from the pregnant words and self-analysis of William Hazlitt: "I do not see how there can be high spirits without low ones. . . . They" (the English) "have a way of their own. Their mirth is a relaxation from gravity, a challenge to dull care to be gone; and one is not always clear at first, whether the appeal is successful. The cloud may still hang on the brow; the ice may not thaw at once. . . . Our insular situation and character are, I should say, most likely to foster, as they have in fact fostered, the greatest quantity of natural and striking humour, in spite of our plodding tenaciousness, and want both of gaiety and quickness of perception. . . . Fielding and Hogarth. These were thorough specimens of true English humour; yet both were grave men. In reality, too high a pitch of animal spirits runs away with the imagination, . . . is inclined to take the jest for granted when it ought to work it out with patient and marked touches, and it ends in vapid flippancy and impertinence. . . . We seem duller and sadder than we are. . . . I conjure up the cheerful passages of my life, and a crowd of happy images appear before me. No one would see it in my looks—my eyes grow dull and fixed . . . the traces of pleasure, in my case, sink into an absorbent ground of thoughtful melancholy." . . . etc.—"Merry England," published in the New Monthly Magazine for December 1825.

spontaneous gifts of the native writer, deriving for instance from the under-statement of the old Saxons, we are in each instance unable to judge. The problem of course is too delicate and difficult to be susceptible of plain solutions. All we can say is that in a number of cases it does not appear unreasonable to conjecture that both formative influences had a share; the instinctive use of felicitous restraint in speech would come to some extent naturally; and then, the lesson and example of the French trouvères and jongleurs would tell its own tale. Most influential on the French side was probably the general tone and atmosphere of high-class life.

Let us frankly give up all attempt at a methodical grouping, the difficulties of which would be insuperable, and content ourselves with taking up the more important texts in, so to say, a progressive order, as they show a gradual approximation to genuine humour. It is hardly necessary to point out that this selection, made out of four centuries of an abundant literature, must be not only very tentative, but quite incomplete, and not a little arbitrary. A fuller and a more accurate study of the period would have to render their dues to the conditions of space and time, to distinguish between different regions, as for instance the South and the North of England, Scotland and Wales; and try to follow the ups

and downs of French influence, in that stretch of time as a whole, or within each century.[1]

The most popular things, in the free style of the French fabliaux and tales—which had quite a vogue, and were plentifully translated—fell under the ban of censorship, as they had done during the Anglo-Saxon period: "scarcely any representatives of humorous tales in English before 1400 are extant." [2] We know, however, that the "jongleurs" and the "goliards" flourished in England, were it only from the condemnations and censures passed upon them. The Latin form with which the scurrilous songs of the vagrant priests were invested, has allowed them in some cases to pass muster; and to the name of Walter Map were attached some of the best-known hymns in praise of Bishop Golias; well worth quoting, were it not that Latin texts are not strictly within our subject. Who could find fault with the dignified Oxford archdeacon, if the other side of his personality, when given free play, was anything but orthodox? In that "Norman-Welshman," as has been remarked, lived one of the predecessors of Chaucer.[3] As far as we can

[1] In so far as the fourteenth century is concerned, those distinctions are ably surveyed by Mr. K. Sisam in *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, 1921; p. xvi-xxix.

[2] J. E. Wells, *Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, 1916; p. 177.

[3] W. H. Schofield, *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer*, p. 57.

judge, that literature of release was no less explicit than in France; but there often breathes in its impudence and irresponsibility a soul of humorous intent, quietly chuckling over the contrast between manner and matter, language and theme.

Some English fabliaux of the fourteenth century have come down to us; and none are of more vivid interest than the "Dame Siriz," and that shoot from the trunk of the French Renart, "The Fox and the Wolf." The "Dame Siriz" has all the brazen cynicism of the typical French tales. It treats the well-known theme, common to many ages and literatures, of the naïve woman whom an old hag wins to a lover's suit by frightening her with the sad case of a lady, who was unkind, and transformed into a bitch. The slyness in this piece, and the felicitous traits, full of gusto and verve, in the "Fox and Wolf," would tend to show that a Middle English audience could appreciate properly humorous elements in stories, the fun of which was rather, generally speaking, of the broad and easy kind. The same might be said of such older irreverent or topsy-turvy pieces as "The Order of Fair Ease" and "The Land of Cockaygne." [1] But most often, and even in cases where the French original was plain and inviting

[1] For a full treatment of the subject, see *Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse*, edited by E. H. McKnight, 1913.

(as in the "Pennyworth of Wit"), the shamefaced English narrator manages to save the story from the final triumph of the vicious, so that the point itself is unwittingly given up or spoilt. Few are the texts in which the light-hearted cynical manner is caught and rendered with genuine efficiency. The fact is that the resistance of the cultivated taste to such tales was in the fourteenth century becoming more open and confirmed, while the common people continued to relish them; and it is not difficult to see why the main stream of real English humour did not and could not flow in that ready channel.[1]

It is thus elsewhere that we must look for that main stream. No doubt, through the three long centuries from the Conquest to Chaucer, the Saxon peasants, artisans or tradesmen, no less than the Norman barons, lawyers or merchants, loved to hear funny stories; a fund of potential humour was thus accumulated, in which we may conjecture that the livelier wit and mirth that had come from France raised the broad jokes of the native stock to a somewhat higher level of self-possession and piquancy of phrase. But if we look for symptoms of humour in contemporary literature, we find more often than not that

[1] M. Ascoli (p. 37-8) has justly laid stress on the significant attitude of the Englishman, who ignores the Frenchman's broad hint, in Robert Gaguin's late fifteenth century French poem (*Le Passe-Temps d'Oisiveté*, 1488).

the mood on which it is based bears the hall-mark of a more characteristically English origin.

The insulting ironies and invectives of Layamon's "Brut," mostly added to the speeches of his model (Wace), are almost as primitive in spirit as those taunts which we noticed in "Beowulf." At the moment, a critic rightly points out, when Uther has fatally wounded Gillomar, and slays Pascent, "the poet's voice has the very tone of the 'Ode to Brunanburh' ": [1]

"On the head he smote him
So that he down fell,
In his mouth his sword thrust—
Uncouth his dinner—
So went the sword's point
In the earth beneath him.
And then spake Uther,
'Pascent, now lie there,
Now hast thou Britain,
To thy hand hast won it.
So is now hap to thee;
Therein death has come to thee;
Dwell shalt thou therein
With thy fellow Gillomar,
And well enjoy Britain.
To you I deliver it;

[1] E. Legouis, in *A History of English Literature*, Part I, Book I, chapt. II, 5.—See also the passage quoted by Jusserand, *Lit. History*, Book II, c. IV, II, p. 220-21.

Ye twain may presently
Dwell in the land with us;
Nor dread ye ever
Who food will give ye.' "[1]

There is a note of restraint as well, a fierce duality of meaning, an under-statement of exultation, just able to key down slightly the words of victory and of hate, in the patriotic songs of Laurence Minot.[2]

That is not much yet. And one may contend that irony has nothing to do with humour—although the two shade off into each other, and no doubt answer to one and the same broad mental attitude. The distinction between them has been chiefly emphasized under the influence of definite views as to the nature of humour, and its so-called soul of sympathy, the truth of which our survey will bring us solid reason to doubt. But we next pass on to writers of greater significance for our purpose, because in them we plainly catch

[1] *Layamon's Brut*, edit. Madden, vol. II, p. 334-335, lines 18,090 to 18,109.

[2] See the Battle of Halidon Hill, l. 11-16 and 57-61; the poem on Bannockburn, l. 59-70; the poem marked XI, l. 25-30; etc. (ed. Joseph Hall).—Another element of some significance, though only related to humour, and not exactly humorous, is the vigorous realism of the late thirteenth century poem, *Havelock the Dane*, of which a critic has remarked that "the horse-play of *Havelock* . . . is similar to that found in Chaucer" (Prof. S. B. Liljegren, in Litteris for July 1929, p. 13).

the affinity of English humour with the homely native spirit of realism allied to moralizing.

Who would expect humour from the heavily didactic manner of Robert of Brunne's "Handlyng Synne"? Here is the typical utterance of a mediaeval preacher, bent upon the endless and ever attractive task, the full explanation of the whole duty of man. Nothing could be more English than that treatise on the ten commandments and the corresponding sins, although it is founded on an Anglo-French work, William of Wadington's "Manuel des Pechiez." Still, in that edifying stuff, we find not a few episodes where a sly humour peeps out; as that tale (not in the French original) "of the witch and her cow-sucking bag; and how a bishop failed to work her charm, because he did not believe in it." We seem to hear some dour Scots minister, or some English country parson, with a twinkle in his eye, telling the story. The witch has hoodwinked the bishop, and persuaded him that at the bidding of some magical words which she recites, a bag flies out of the room and milks the cows; the holy man, in the enthusiasm of wonder, must needs try in his turn, and repeats the charm, but it does not work; and as he grows suspicious, the witch rises to a sublime height of appropriateness and humour. What you lack, she tells the bishop, is faith; believe in my words, pronounce them in the right

spirit, and the miracle will happen. This is one of the first authentic notes of exquisite humour in English. The paradox of the situation, the mute eloquence of the inverted parts of teacher and taught, the fine essence of relativity and irony, are set off by the economy and subdued tenor of the style.[1] An indefinable flavour of the same kind is diffused again and again through the naïve, familiar and quaint equanimity of the moralist, who can suppress at will, and with no apparent effort, the expected reactions of his ethical sense. A foretaste of Chaucer's quiet smiling manner may almost be enjoyed there.

If we detect some humour in William Langland, shall we trace it to a spirit of mirth, and affirm that its ultimate origin lies in the lighthearted, cynical gaiety of the Norman-French invaders? The question, thus put, answers itself. In mood, in inspiration, no work more genuinely expresses the national tendencies of the fourteenth century English, as a synthetic race, than "Piers Plowman"; and its conscious borrowing from the properly French strain seems to be very slight. The author's temper is that of the man for whom moral issues are desperately prominent, and who cannot help concentrating upon them

[1] Robert of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*, edit. F. J. Furnivall, 1901; the first commandment, p. 19-21.—The text belongs to the first years of the fourteenth century.

heart and soul. There never was a more entire earnestness. And yet, from the very Prologue, there dimly rises before our mind's eye the image of a story-teller with a power of grim, forcible emphasis, which does not preclude, and rather invites, the quiet glow of a just perceptible slyness. Whether Langland was one poet in three texts, or three writers under one name, we do not know for sure, although the thesis of a single authorship in "Piers Plowman" has been rather gaining ground; but the chief personality that lives and breathes in the main parts of the work evinces, when all is said, a self-possessed determination, a shrewd sense of the other side of things, and a turn for irony, although the tense seriousness no doubt stands in the way of a fuller humour. The poet knows how to suppress the signs that would reveal his own perception of paradox or absurdity; he is well aware of these, however; he catches them as they rise, and his subdued sense and enjoyment silently emanate from the reserve of the manner.

One might instance, besides the well-known apologue of the rats trying to hang a bell round the cat's neck,[1] such occasional flashes as the idea that when the angel of heaven condescends to speak, it is only in Latin—since common people, we are to remember, ought not to be told how

[1] Prologue, edit. Skeat, 146 sqq.

to justify themselves; [1] or the words in passing about the pilgrims, with the finely managed anti-climax:

"They went forth on their way, with many wise tales,
And had leave to lie all their lives after." [2]

Or the simple remark of other holy men:

"They turned themselves into hermits, in order to have their ease." [3]

Or the truly effective touch that when Avarice hears the French word "restitution," he guesses at once that it is another name for stealing; [4] and the episode of the palmer, who has been to all the shrines, but who in his pilgrimages has never met a person called Truth (God the Father); [5] or the picture of the procession that accompanies to Westminster Lady Mead (Bribery) riding upon a sheriff "shod all new," while Falsehood sits upon a "sisour" (or deputy magistrate) "that trotted softly"; [6] and so many more. Indeed, how could humour fail to crown, as a natural and essential bloom, the vigour of an imagination that caught so vividly, so racily, the concrete figure and picturesqueness of things; and how could an artist

[1] Ibid., 128-130.
[2] 48-49.
[3] 57.
[4] Passus V, 232-240.
[5] Passus V, 520, etc.
[6] Passus II, 163-5.

be dead to the potential comedy of life, who was enough of a realist to draw the picture of a tavern in London,[7] where Gula (or Gluttony), out for church and a shriving, irresistibly finds his way? With all the didactic bent, the bitter pessimism of heart and mind, and the total lack of artistic cleverness, we have here the indispensable and all-sufficing background: a sense of contrasts, supple enough for the writer to handle them objectively, and to draw from them effects of implicitness; a fund of shrewd experience, conscious and free enough for him to take pleasure in the indirect presentment of a many-sided reality. Repressed and checked in almost every way, the essence of humour is still present and active; and its aroma is of an unmistakably national, English quality.

Very similar in its general characteristics is the spirit of broad humour displayed by the unknown author of "Patience," that alliterative paraphrase of the Book of Job, whose connection with the other poems of the Cotton manuscript has roused so much interest among scholars, since the "Pearl" has been recognized as one of the jewels of the finest water in all literature. Here again, we have a homily, a moralizing aim, never lost sight of; and yet, a strong realism, a concrete mental grasp of things imagined, called up and

[7] Passus V, 314 sqq.

shown forth with the full vivid wealth of their attributes; and a vein of sly, almost subtle amusement in the display of ponderous, grotesque, unseemly, startling images, which belongs to the raciest fund of popular English humour. Although the author's intimate acquaintance with French literature is regarded as certain, it is the Scandinavian influence that can be traced most strongly in the vocabulary and phrasing. Having before him the episode of Jonah, from the Vulgate, our poet, in the words of Sir Israel Gollancz, whose translation into modern English we are quoting, "transformed and amplified . . . the terse Biblical narrative, so that the story might vividly appeal to simple folk": [1]

"As a mote in at a minster door, so mighty were its jaws,
Jonah enters by the gills, through slime and gore;
he reeled in through a gullet, that seemed to him a road,
tumbling about, aye head over heels,
till he staggers to a place as broad as a hall;
then he fixes his feet there and gropes all about,
and stands up in its belly, that stank as the devil;
in sorry plight there, 'mid grease that savoured as hell,
his bower was arrayed, who would fain risk no ill.
Then he lurks there and seeks in each nook of the nave
the best sheltered spot, yet nowhere he finds
rest or recovery, but filthy mire
wherever he goes; but God is ever dear;
and he tarried at length and called to the Prince. . . .

[1] *Patience*, edit. Sir I. Gollancz; Preface.

. . . Then he reached a nook and held himself there,
where no foul filth encumbered him about.
He sat there as safe, save for darkness alone,
as in the boat's stern, where he had slept ere.
Thus, in the beast's bowel, he abides there alive,
three days and three nights, thinking aye on the Lord,
His might and His mercy and His measure eke;
now he knows Him in woe, who could not in weal.
And onward rolls the whale through deep wild-seas,
through many rough regions, in stubborn will,
for, though that mote in its maw was small,
that monster grew sickish at heart, I trow,
and worried the wight. And Jonah aye heard
the huge flood as it lashed the whale's back and its sides." [1]

That is not the cynical fun or even the pert slyness of the French fabliaux; a world of instinct and temperament parts this rich, full, high-flavoured rejoicing in the grotesqueness of things holy, when humanized and realized, from the elegant hints of the "humour de finesse." The main origin and descent of English humour is here; and even when the refining has been done by Chaucer, and done again by the Addisons and the Sternes, the vein of the more typical English humorists will be rather in line with "Patience" than with the artistic restraint of the French pattern.

The same note can be heard in the poem on Christ's descent to hell, ascribed to the middle of

[1] *Patience;* 268-82 and 289-302.

the thirteenth century,[1] and which has been called "the oldest English drama," although it seems more proper to regard it as a link, both between the English minstrels and their French rivals, whose "disputoisons" and "jeux-partis" they translated and imitated, and between the repertory of the English minstrels and the early drama, especially the morality.[2] The whole situation of the "Harrowing of Hell," in which the Lord consents to argue with the evil one, on a plane of assumed equality and almost friendliness, is rich with a flavour diffused through all the implications of the dialogue. These are of course well known to every reader, and build up an exceptionally efficient background of sly, indirect allusions and drollery. How could one resist the exquisite naïvety of Adam's words, underlining what was the grim tragedy of the plot to hearts full of faith, and anticipating the use of under-statement in so much modern humour:

> "Lord, since then thou art come to us,
> Thou bring us out of this house." [3]

[1] W. Creizenach, in *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. V, chapt. III, p. 46.
[2] H. Child in *Cambr. Hist. of Lit.*, vol. V, chapt. II, p. 29.
[3] *The Harrowing of Hell*, edit. Edinburgh, 1835; p. 12.

Or let us listen to the Lord's pleading with Satan:

> "Satanas, he said, it was mine
> The apple that thou gavest him (Adam),
> The apple, and the apple tree,
> Both were made through me.
> How mayest thou in any wise
> Of other men's things make merchandise?
> Since then thou boughtest him with mine,
> With reason should I have him." [1]

But the York play on the same subject, whose relation to the poem is obscure, gives us over a much more ample canvas a more varied and a fuller display of genuine early humour. The author is visibly taking much pleasure in the fun of that extraordinarily vivid rendering of Christ's descent to hell, but he remains in full control of his amusement, and plays with the realistic, everyday, familiar human transcription of the tremendous episode which he gives us, in a spirit of freedom untainted by irreverence. The detachment of humour is there, in its incipient state; and the scene is enjoyed for its own sake, not only as a means of edification. The effects are not explicit, but, partly owing to the reserve which the subject would naturally command, discreet and virtual. When the demons complain to Beelzebub of the commotion and unrest that

[1] Ibid., p. 9.

are set loose in Limbo by the coming of Christ, the chief urges them to use the strong hand; but Jesus breaks in against all opposition; and when Satan, the supreme leader, intervenes in person, Beelzebub retorts angrily:

> "Aye, beat him sore, that is soon said,
> But come thyself and serve him so." [1]

The rest is as delightfully lifelike and quaint; but along with the quaintness, which is the reaction of our modern mind, we feel here the slyness of the mediaeval sense of humour. This is almost as finely managed as Chaucer's manner. And yet, the inspiration is definitely popular and national. The parallels one might point out with French "mystères" cannot alter our impression that this English rendering of a theme common to European Christianity in the Middle Ages is racy of the soil of England, as the French episodes were rooted in similar French instincts. A people does not learn to relish such things from the example set by another; they must be congenial and native to be at all possible.

To the cycle of early drama we might turn again, so as to share in the peals of laughter with which the Towneley "Play of Noah" [2] must have

[1] K. Sisam, *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, p. 205-6.—For this part of the subject, see J. B. Moore, *The Comic and Realistic in English Drama*, 1925.

[2] In Sisam, p. 185-203.

been received. But if Noah's wife is a shrew, and her husband has to enforce his will with the patriarchal vigour of his fists, the whole theme and the treatment, we have to confess, are funny without being humorous in our sense of the term. That is broad farce, of a very explicit kind, although there may be felt here and there a whiff of a better flavour—a passing sense of the contrast between the majesty of the Biblical style and the familiarity of the modern rendering. Those gleams are rare: it is not humorously, but simply and wholeheartedly, that a farcical colour is spread thick over the story of Genesis. And the comic interludes in the other plays of the series, while they show vigour, are hardly more significant for the purpose of our enquiry.

We are thus led to place our final emphasis on a very original and interesting poem, in which mediaeval English humour reached one of its most remarkable, as it was one of its earliest expressions. The author of "The Owl and the Nightingale" was probably that Master Nicholas whose name is mentioned at the beginning of the piece; and the latest evidence seems to throw the date of composition back to the end of the twelfth century, about 1180.[1] To our external knowledge, the life and personality of Master Nicholas

[1] H. B. Hinckley, in Public Mod. Lang. Assoc. of America, XLIV, 2 (June 1929).

are almost a blank; but how we penetrate, through his poem, into the mind of a singularly reflective, mature and shrewd man! His theme in itself is almost a commonplace; but he has loaded it with a remarkably full intent, and the main allegorical purpose is worked out on several planes of symbolism. What the Owl stands for—the old religious poetry, a stricter mood of moral restraint, the spirit of Puritanism before its time; and what the Nightingale represents—the new love poetry, an early humanism, a softened ideal of conduct, with a touch of the modern spirit [1] —is a fascinating problem; while the skill with which a free scope is given to the expansion of the subject, though "neither the action nor the debate ever leaves the animal plane of being," [2] is in itself a feat of art. But to our purpose what matters most is the intuition here displayed of the exquisiteness of a relaxed, easy and familiar simplicity, as the ground note upon which is raised a fabric of subtly humorous variations. The charm of the manner which was to be Chaucer's, and La Fontaine's, is here distinctly adumbrated; a perfect tone and air of naïvety creates the very atmosphere of humour, by spreading a constant sense of normality and naturalness. The whole

[1] *The Owl and the Nightingale*, edit. J. W. H. Atkins; Introduction, p. lxxix, etc.

[2] Ibid., p. lxxx.

treatment and the style savour of the implicit, and release an ever-fresh under-current of delicate suggestion and meaning. Even the self-revelation of the writer under a veil is turned to use as an element of humour. The sense of the relativity of things lives and breathes in the delicious fun of the Owl demonstrating, to her full satisfaction, the superiority of her song to the Nightingale's . . .

"I sing smoothly, with full melody and in loud tones. Thou dost regard every song as dreadful that is different from thy piping tones. As for my note, it is bold and masterful—much like the sound of a great horn; while thine is like that of a tiny pipe fashioned out of a reed unripe." [1]

The portraiture of the two birds, of the two characters, one might say the two moral types, has the plenitude and sureness of touch which have only been reached by the masters in the perennial comedy of humanity. Is the piece, as a whole, a satire upon the austerity of wisdom and against surly experience? Far from it; a philosophical impartiality is maintained throughout; and the winsome blithe spirit of the nightingale carries the verdict of every reader, like that of the birds which listen to the debate; but Master

[1] From the modern rendering in the edition of the text by J. W. H. Atkins, p. 157-8.

Nicholas knows better; and it is not the least of his ironical hints, conveyed between the lines, that the young and the brilliant will be given the prize, but that the old and the sad and the wise may still not have been in the wrong. The inspiration of a tolerant charitable sweetness is here tinged with the sober pensiveness which is such a common attribute of the masters of English humour.

How does the poem stand in relation to French influence? Of course the subject belongs to the fertile category of the debates, with which the French "trouvères" were particularly associated; but its particular kind, the fable or animal theme, is one whose special home was perhaps in England. It seems difficult to believe that such a subtle achievement, such a sure design and sense of suggestion, may not have been taught by the more finished examples of French skill; here, surely, is the spirit of "finesse" active; but the derivation from Southern models, which was long regarded as certain, does not rest on actual evidence; and the traces of French influence in the poem itself are but slight.[1] Altogether, it may be safer to say that "The Owl and the Nightingale" is already a synthetic work, like that of Chaucer two centuries later; it testifies in a striking way to the

[1] See the study by H. B. Hinckley ("The Date, Author and Sources of the Owl and the Nightingale"), in P. M. L. A., XLIV, 2.

cosmopolitanism of the twelfth century; it embodies a general stimulation of thought and art, the source of which can be definitely laid in the culture of France; at the same time, it welds that more refined and conscious spirit into an original whole with a solidly English inspiration; and the humour, which is the essence of the fresh delightful novelty in the manner, while it owes something to French "finesse," is more distinctly of a national quality; it reveals, at that early date, the fusion of the French and the native strains into a product where the foreign elements are no longer alien, but turned into part and parcel of a different collective personality, a new genius.

Those features seem to foresketch the eminent artistry of Chaucer; and the perspective of Middle English literature leads up to him, the greatest humorist, as the greatest writer, of mediaeval England. But Chaucer is of a class apart, and must be studied by himself.

To sum up, there indisputably was an important French influence upon the development of English humour in the mediaeval period before Chaucer; it was not, however, of the kind which has been more than once implied or defined; it should not be regarded as the awaking of a new faculty, the direct and full shaping of a mental attitude after a foreign model. It was formative, rather than creative. The latent possibility of

humour was there; the keener spirit of French pleasantry, the more precocious instinct of French artistic restraint, stimulated and to some extent guided the growth. But the process was controlled from the first by the imperious law of the original temperament which was evolving with the self-consciousness of England; and the national elements assumed the leading part almost at once; the properly English traits of character were reflected in the mode and manner of English humour. As the development went on, it grew more apparent that the fund of serious, and not that of merry disposition, would have more to do with the duality of meaning which humour implies, than the cleverness and agility of the French mind. Was Chaucer the supreme, the outstanding exception? The problem can no longer be evaded; and we shall devote to it the next stage in our enquiry.

IV. CHAUCER'S HUMOUR

Even after the vein of English humour has been followed through the preceding centuries, as it crops up here and there, and the contribution of France to its development has been recognized, its broad and full emergence in the work of Chaucer comes upon one with the suddenness of a miracle. Here humour is no longer a momentary gleam, a lucky accident, or at best an incipient disposition, gathering strength into some distinct flashes. For the first time in the history of English literature, perhaps of all literature, it is the soul and essence of an artist and his art.

It was not so from the beginning of Chaucer's self-expression. Penetrating studies have been written [1] on the gradual change in his manner, from the uncertainties of his early apprenticeship to the sure firm aim of the writer who has found himself. Stages can be marked out in the dropping of convention, and the fastening on the truth of personality. Humour grows with the personality and the truth, from the "Book of the Duchess," the "Parliament of Fowls," to the

[1] Especially by Professor E. Legouis (*Chaucer*, 1910).

"House of Fame," where it breaks in decidedly upon the solemnity of a high theme, and the "Legend of Good Women," where its demands become so exacting that the poem has to be left unfinished, because its subject and a humorous disposition agree too ill together. Even when the matter is still borrowed, as in the "Troilus and Criseide," the treatment transforms it by pitching it in a comic key. Critics are agreed that the "Canterbury Tales" are the complete revelation of a genius which brings all its materials under the resolute law of an original design. Here Chaucer's mastery is supreme, and his humour displays all its freedom and range; it is no loss to concentrate our short survey on this single work, the scope of which is so varied and ample that from it no characteristic note is missing.

Chaucer's humour is a way of thinking, an attitude to life; it possesses that background of moral correspondences and affinities which is not exactly the same with all humorists—for the correspondences are supple, the affinities are not binding—but which tends to be more or less present in all, and the variations of which answer to the varieties of the humorous manner. Chaucer's position in humour is a normal and a central one; he has not consciously worked out, one feels, all its implications, he has not realized all its philosophy; but his inmost self is saturated with it, and

in that habit of mind he truly moves and has his being. His busy thought has gathered in the facts of life, analyzing and distilling them, and the quintessential product now impregnates each element of his consciousness. Subtle and rich is the flavour; but it yields its secret to the intuition born in us of our own experience; we know that aroma, it is the very spirit of the relativity, the diversity, the unreasonableness of things. A pragmatist would say that the philosophy of humour was pluralistic; and indeed it is made up of the acceptance of the stubborn contradictions which our endeavours in all fields fail to eradicate, and there is no greater enemy to humour than the passion of unity. An acceptance not inert, since it is lively, and may be ironical; not insipid, since it is pungent, and the pungency may even shade off into bitterness; but the natural outcome of which is a tolerance, a readiness to understand, almost to sympathize; a broad genial humanity, if not necessarily, as has often been said, a tenderness and a love.

Chaucer, from the mental watch-tower whence he surveys the world of his time, has taken in all the varieties and the absurdities; he has noted the discrepancies of character, the perverse individualities of creatures, the shiftings of principle and conduct, the clash of reality and appearance. His intelligence is reconciled with

the relativity of things; and his eye quietly looks for the contrast, the opposition, the other side of the face and the soul, the tears in happiness, the smile in misery; to all the unaccountable habits of men and of fate, he responds with the suppleness of the mind which no single formula has enslaved; and as his reaction is free and easy, it is immune from the pain of disappointed expectations or jarred principles; his sense of the novelty and the freshness in daily happenings supplies him with an intellectual amusement, a pleasure of satisfied curiosity; the comedy of mankind offers itself fully to him; and his sensibility not being engrossed by the grievances of the naïve or the weak, his mood preserves its softer quality, the fellowship, the sympathy, the pity, which will rise in a normal consciousness from the mere sight of the human drama.

No more is needed to give that philosophy of universal tolerance and mellow wisdom its glow of appealing gentleness; the sight of the unlimited error and misfortune that so intimately mingle with the infinite fun of life elicits the smile that is not unkind, the irony that accepts and forgives. A warm radiance emanates from the dramatic presentment which might be serene but might be cold; and the all-embracing genius of Shakespeare by the side of Chaucer's will seem mysterious and unresponsive in its more power-

ful equanimity. The mind that took up and displayed the images of youth and love and honour and cruel fate which combine in the *Knight's Tale* into such a gorgeous tapestry of feudal pomp and destiny, had possessed itself of the most lucid spirit which the wise have ever learnt from life; but the wisdom was quick and feeling as it was thoughtful. If modern humour comes with Chaucer into its own, it is because on the apparently limited scale of a still early age, from a contact with the world which was in fact singularly varied and broad, he evolved the very soul of modern humour. The name of "humour" he had not yet, although he made use of this word in its current fourteenth century sense; [1] and so the self-realization of the attitude in his mind could not be complete; [2] a degree further of conscious deliberateness will be added from the time when the notion of a special mode of reacting to life has crystallized around a name. But it can be doubted, whether Chaucer lost more than he

[1] Representing a physical state associated with a corresponding tendency of mind.—See C. R. Baskervill, *English Elements in Jonson's Early Comedy*, 1911.

[2] The words which Chaucer uses in order to denote his idea of comic inventiveness, are none the less interesting:

> "Touchinge this cherl, they seyde, subtiltee
> And heigh wit made him speken as he spak." . . .
> (Somnour's Tale, 582-583).

The association of "subtlety" with "high wit" is significant.—The "churl" has been devising a form of retaliation which is an experiment in practical humour.

gained by that still relatively primitive standpoint of his art; humour with the moderns, as its method has become so clear, is liable to grow mechanical; and the margin of loose unconscious intent, previous to humour's final coming of age, favours the retention by the humorist of the virtue of spontaneousness. That, however, short of the fullest lucidity of purpose, Chaucer was very much alive to the original manner of his pleasantry, it is no less essential to emphasize.

The instinct of relativity which is the soul of humour is reflected in its method; it will say one thing, and mean another thing; or rather, it will bring out more forcibly what it does not actually say, adding point to a suggestion by its very indirectness. Just as its matter lies in contrasts, its manner is an inversion, a transposition. The tragi-comedy of life is thus shown forth with no apparent sense of its quality. Now slyness is the name given to the underhand conveyance of values, especially comic; and slyness indeed is next of kin to humour; it is as it were its outward transcription and figure. The humorist from the first has been sly; he has staked his success on his seeming naïvety or sluggishness of mind.

It is a remarkable fact that not only should Chaucer have possessed so largely the spiritual background of humour, but that his keen intui-

tion should have revealed to him the virtue of its characteristic method. We know that the countenance of the poet bore the stamp of that absorption which seems to betoken a mind turned all inward upon itself, indifferent to the fascinating varieties of things—those varieties which in fact humour feeds upon. Let us listen to the words of mine host, addressing the silent member of the company:

> . . . "What man artow?" quod he;
> "Thou lokest as thou woldest finde an hare,
> For ever upon the ground I see thee stare.
> Approche neer, and loke up merily." . . .
> . . . "He semeth elvish by his contenaunce,
> For un-to no wight dooth he daliaunce." [1]

While Chaucer was drawing that sketch, what could he be but keenly aware of the several planes of thought on which he actually lived? By not refusing his sanction to that incomplete figuring of his mood, he allows us to infer that the over-simplified image did not clash with his main purpose. He knew that it served his turn to look "elvish." He went even beyond that degree of self-consciousness; he grasped the nature and the meaning of the mask which the humorist

[1] Prologue to Sir Thopas, 5-8 and 13-14.—The meaning of "elvish" is "absent-minded, engrossed in distant cares"; and that of "daliaunce," "gossip, pleasant demeanour, favour."—Here, as everywhere else, we quote from Skeat's text.

must wear, and let us see that he saw through it by now and then peeping from under it. His readers might after all believe that a sober serious countenance was a transcription of his whole inner being; humour is not only compatible with a pensive bent, but bears a genuine affinity with it. What shall we say, however, to the pretence of a weak understanding? The poet's frequent insistence on the slowness and shortness of his "wit" lets us into the secret of an artlessness, which is not properly speaking the cloak of art; it is the art itself. . . .

"My wit is short, ye may wel understonde." . . .[1]

The trick was not uncommon among the French "trouvères"; it was part of the stock in trade of feigned humility, in poetry as in love; to some extent, we have here a matter of tradition and form; but the way in which Chaucer acquits himself of that perfunctory gesture charges it with a totally new significance. What we find in his words is the seeming mental sluggishness of the humorist grown so conscious, felt to be so useful, so vital, that he must needs be constantly calling our attention to it. The hint, he feels, will not give him away, but rather arouse some unwary reader to a more lively attention, play the part of a twinkle in the poet's eye: is not the mask, on

[1] Prologue, 746.

occasion, mistaken for the face, and does not mine host accept "Sir Thopas" as a serious romance? Never was naïvety more sly than that of Chaucer; but never was the appearance of naïvety turned to more fertile or more delightful uses. And so perfect is the imitation of naïvety, that it is not entirely an imitation; the mood of simple-mindedness which best serves the purpose of humour has grown so habitual, that the mind really lives it and does not only play with a mere pretence; at the same time as it indulges in the sophisticated perception of its own deceit, it tastes the pleasure of looking at things in an unsophisticated light. The quaintness of Chaucer's poetry is not entirely an illusion, the inevitable anachronism of our modern reaction to an earlier and a very different mode of thinking; it is the genuine gift of a man who has retained the freshness of youth in mature disillusioned experience.

Thus it was that in the plenitude of his artistic powers, Chaucer turned instinctively to the pageant of English life, and from its variety, with no other object, on the surface, than the picturesqueness of contrasted figures, called up the wide manifold scene of the "Canterbury Tales." His deeper purpose was at work in the choice of this topic; and the treatment was shaped by a free broad touch, with no apparent effort, to serve its turn. Doubly strengthened by a concrete philos-

ophy—a temperament of mind rather than a set of ideas—and by a clear intuition of its own psychological process, Chaucer's humour is so rich and full that it reaches at one stroke a stage of development far beyond that of his own time. His art will be lost by his successors, and will have to be rediscovered; no one before Addison will equal the delicacy of its shades, and no one before Sterne will add substantially to its background. From the eighteenth century to our own day, the progress of consciousness has inevitably endowed humour with a new depth and a further wealth of materials; the increased self-knowledge of modern man has enlarged the possibilities of humorous expression, and given a sharper edge to that sense of moral contrast upon which humour lives. Sterne extended its scope to the subconscious personality, Lamb found in a more supple psychological detachment the means of freer and madder pranks. The humour of our age is heir to a much vaster range of potential effects. But the form of Chaucer's humour can hardly be improved upon; it is perfect, within its limits and of its kind.

II

For the very reason that Chaucer's humour is so subtle and pervasive, to illustrate it with examples is not easy; it is diffused almost every-

where, and although it will have its moments of greater density, its manner of gentleness and bland genial irony hardly allows of those outbreaks which supply the critic with a wide choice of typical passages. Moreover, the works of Chaucer are much better known than those of other Middle English writers; a fair acquaintance with the "Canterbury Tales" can be taken for granted. It may be permissible in this case to rely more upon allusion than on quotation.

From the opening sketches of the Prologue, the sense of a singularly attentive and sure manner grows upon the reader. Things are said quietly, with ever so slight a tremor of consciousness, and over the canvas that a leisurely hand fills with full-length portraits of men and women, there plays ever so discreetly a lambent flame of irony through the smiling light. Every statement is made in such a way as to create a feeling that all its force and virtue is not spent at once; a portion is more subtle, and releases itself more slowly; it comes out in the pause of attention, while the thought lingers still in our minds; and that constant reserve of phrasing, that habit of meaning a little more than one thing at a time, builds the most general and most elementary impression of humour. Upon that common ground, the moments of more definite quality stand out; but it is the even tenor of that just perceptible discre-

tion and slyness that contributes most to the atmosphere of the poem.

Is that tone always present? The exceptions are very few, and fewer than one might expect from the subjects of the tales or the nature of the speakers. Chaucer, no doubt, took much care to relieve one note by another, and to prevent monotony; his cleverness in the grouping of the themes is conspicuous; but the temperament of humour was too strong, and would come out through the most definite trend of pathos or moralizing. Is it quite sure that the artist, in those cases, was not aware of its coming out? We have good reason to believe that Chaucer's subconscious instinct had few secrets to which his lucid mind was not a party. In the "Knight's Tale," while the narrator seems only bent upon the creation of dramatic suspense, and the raising of a fine fabric of noble episodes, we feel all along that on a deeper plane his interest and his sympathy are tinged with a wistful and pitying amusement. The sentimental and mournful tale of the Man of Law is broken in upon here and there by some jarring notes, which would be inexplicable, if the countenance of the poet was not dimly discernible behind that of the speaker, with just the ghost of a twinkle in his eye. The didactic treatise of Melibaeus would be a psycholoigcal impossibility, if some subtle signs did not intimate a purpose not

of seriousness but of mockery. The frequent and dull quotations, for instance, are obviously handled with a keen perception of the pedantry and irrelevance of most edifying texts. The contrast between the Monk's physical and moral person, and the tragic stories which he so perfunctorily relates, is the main element in our latent sense of impropriety and insincerity. The fun about the "Pardoner's Tale" is that this homily on the deadly sins preached with such glaring lack of genuine faith and piety, is no worse than another sermon would probably be; while the mind of the preacher dwells in characteristic fashion on the realities that appeal to him. The Clerk's story of Grisildis would remain in our memory as a purely touching interlude, did not the irrepressible humour of the poet break out in the ballad at the end. . . . Such gleams and flashes are to be found in the Squire's and the Franklin's tales; the Parson's lengthy disquisition winds itself out over a background of feigned resignation and genuine impatience, called up by the host when he begs the holy man to be short. . . . Even the Prioress, in her pretty self-conscious affliction at the sore fate of the poor murdered child, reveals too much of her mincing coquettish ways not to stir a delicate sense of comedy in the reader.

Those are the portions of the poem where the undercurrent of humour might most naturally

have been interrupted. That it is never so for long is a very significant fact. At the other extremity of the poet's range, we find the stories and passages of undoubted jollity and merry-making. Here it is that our study would linger most complacently, if we agreed with the unrestricted meaning so often attached to the word "humour." But the rollicking farce which takes up a large part of the "Canterbury Tales" is not in our view their best claim to be recognized as humorous. It is not the farce itself, anyhow, that is the humour.

The free, coarse adventures related in the Miller's, the Reve's, the Shipman's, the Somnour's tales, for instance, raise an irresistible laugh, or amuse us even while they ruffle our notion of decency, provided that notion is not too exacting. But what then? Like the French fabliaux, the stories of that kind in Chaucer are mostly quite explicit. Nothing, apparently, is kept back, and we surrender to the force of a broad current of fun that whirls us off our feet and carries us onward in triumph. There is the release of the mind from the seriousness of life, the joy of irresponsibility and primitiveness, the salutary sense of the rebellion and the Saturnalia of character, the occasional fit of drunkenness which the ancients regarded as part of the hygiene of a sane man. That Chaucer aims at those effects, and achieves them,

is sure. But is there nothing else? Has not the writer, so to say, his tongue in his cheek? Do we not feel that over and above his obvious meaning, he holds back something less definite, another part of his moral and artistic intent, which steals into us gradually and silently? There is a humorous lining to the farcical stuff of those tales. They appeal to the natural and the unpretentious being in us, no doubt; but our thoughtful and more subtle part is not left unsatisfied. In the history of literature, it has almost always happened that the enormities of common writers were farce, whilst those of great writers were humour. We might have expected it; how could the obscene, the gross, the absurd, recommend themselves to deep and refined minds, unless the grossness and the absurdity were invested by them with their own inner depth and refinement? Aristophanes, Rabelais, Shakespeare, are cases in point; Chaucer is no exception. Not only are the broad stories enriched, again and again, with touches of a different order, where the wealth of observation, the knowledge of character, a picturesque realism are drawn upon; but the broadness and the coarseness themselves serve more ends than appear on the surface. The poet sometimes has through them his fling at us, as in the prologue to the Miller's tale, where he warns the reader, if he feels squeamish, to pass over what

is coming—a sly trick which Sterne, and many others, have since used; how shall we kick against the author's cynicism, when he has an accomplice in ourselves? Or there is the aesthetic irony of the contrast between the dignified occasion, the careful speech, and the unseemly subject. Or more generally still, there is the active presence of a spirit of paradox: the restraint and discretion of the manner imply a conscious purpose, and that purpose, under the circumstances, cannot possibly be other than the purest and most philosophical irony. The imperturbability of the artist, by effecting a transposition of style, creates the very condition of humour; and at the same time his meditative mind, justifying that inversion in its own terms, places before us the staring fact of our animality; a fact to be laughed at rather than wept at, the wise in all times have generally agreed.

Most often, however, the comedy which is offered us lies in the middle region between the incongruities of our physical being and the higher discords of the moral world. Chaucer then finds the materials of his humour in the rich field of character. The "Canterbury Tales" abound in satire, ordinarily gentle, upon occasion more harsh; and what gives to the satire the special quality of humorous art, is the restraint of the style, the subdued manner, the slyness and im-

plicitness of the hints. The most sober degree of satire is very near pure realism, without of course being one with it; and the quiet method of the portraits in the Prologue, the close firm touch of the hand which feels and probes all their features, is guided by a motive where the instinct of psychological truth unites with the artist's joy in the quaintness of individuality. A thrill of recognition and amusement stirs through those wonderful pages; but it is checked, controlled by a master purpose, and the reward of that self-possession is the heightened pleasure of humour. How each of the men and women who figure in the inimitable company is penetratingly, caressingly delineated, and what fine essence of shrewd curiosity, fearless intelligence, genial sympathy breathes in the whole work of the painter, is universally recognized. All through the development of the poem, the study of character is kept up, either in the local prologues where so much lively suggestive talk is exchanged, or in the tales themselves; and the spell of that supple analysis, which lights up the weaknesses and the contradictions of each and all, without embittering our sense of life, would never be broken, were it not for the few instants when the artist is infected by the mediaeval disease of conventional moralizing, and we listen incredulously to the self-revelation of the pardoner or of the Wife of Bath—the

poet substituting himself for them, and describing them through their own mouths in his own words.[1]

What wealth of comedy, and humour, we enjoy in the moral and social satire of Chaucer's great work, every reader knows. Women come in for a full share of the satire, but the treatment of this theme is different from what we find in the "Roman de la Rose" and the fabliaux. Who could resist the inimitable slyness of:

> "Leve brother Osewold,
> Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold.
> But I sey not therfore that thou art oon." . . .[2]

Or:

> "Mulier est hominis confusio;
> Madame, the sentence of this Latin is—
> Womman is mannes Joye and al his blis." [3]

And who could stand the magnificent impudence, the high colour and the loud prattling of the Wife of Bath, and not be aware of the cruelty that lives at the heart of her selfishness? But when all is considered, the feminine sex is spared much of the savage indictment which was almost the

[1] The Pardoner's Prologue; the Prologue to the Tale of the Wife of Bath.

[2] The Miller's Prologue, 43-5.

[3] Nun's Priest's Tale, 344-346.

rule with the compatriots of Jean de Meung. And again, what incomparable gallery of half-ecclesiastical rogues Chaucer has given us! But the passion and the vehemence of Langland's satire are here toned down by the sense of relativity, the worldly prudence of the poet, and altogether by his humour. He shows us many abuses, hints at more; he never actually commits himself with the Lollards.

Parody is indirect, implicit satire; it cuts off the formal criticism and pointing out of faults; it holds a mirror—a more or less distorting mirror—to things, and lets their image be their own censure. There is a strong affinity between that method of apparent abstention, and a humorous turn of pleasantry; most humorists will, at least in passing, try their hand at parody. Chaucer has presented us with a fine example of the manner in "Sir Thopas"; so successful, that as will happen with the best of both humour and parody, it has deceived unwary readers; it deceives mine host in the poem. The close imitation of the themes and style of the degenerated epic romances is maintained very cleverly just one key above, or below, that of the real thing; and those plainer hints which the professional humorist throws out to his audience, those signs of his playful intent—the raising of the eyebrows, the quick flash of the eye, the pouting of the cheek—or, on the con-

trary, the supernatural quiet and impassiveness of the speaker's countenance, are here represented by sudden sallies of irreverence or absurdity which should at once edify us:

> "And I yow telle in good certayn,
> He hadde a semely nose." . . .[1]

Nothing can be more modern in spirit, more expert in artistic handling, than the whole piece; while the unruffled seriousness of genuine humour is preserved all through, the special trick of parody is practised with a fine tact, the features of epic style being reproduced not without a slight twist, just enough to deform them and make them comic. A mischievous absurdity plays pranks with the set paraphernalia of armour, setting, description and narrative. Among the wild beasts of the forest run "the buck and the hare" [2]; among the romantic herbs grows nutmeg "to put in ale."[3] Sir Thopas runs away from his giant when he sees him; after which, due praise is given in the conventional words to his "fair bearing."[4]—The spirit of parody is diffused through many other tales, as in that of the Nun's Priest's, a delightful mock-heroic variation on an episode of the French "Roman de Renart," where it must be confessed that Chaucer has admirably

[1] Sir Thopas, 17-18.
[2] Ibid., 45.
[3] 52.
[4] 121.

developed the suggestions of the theme, and enriched it with all his finer and more lively fancy:

"O destinee, that mayst not been eschewed!"

the poet cries out, when the Fox has seized Chauntecleer . . .

"And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce.
O Venus, that art goddesse of plesaunce,
Sin that thy servant was this Chauntecleer, . . .
. . . Why woldestow suffre him on thy day to dye? . . .
. . . Certes, swich cry ne lamentacioun
Was never of ladies maad, whan Ilioun
Was wonne. . . .
. . . But sovereynly dame Pertelote shrighte,
Ful louder than dide Hasdrubales wyf,
Whan that hir housbond hadde lost his lyf,
And that the Romayns hadde brend Cartage. . . .
. . . O woful hennes, right so cryden ye,
As, whan that Nero brende the citee
Of Rome, cryden senatoures wyves." . . .

And the sudden sly characteristic touch:

"Now wol I torne to my tale agayn." [1]

The story was never more gloriously raised to the magniloquence of heroic lore, nor was the roguish irony ever more patent without ceasing to be implicit. But even in the most serious tales,

[1] Nun's Priest's Tale, 518-54.

the mood of parody is lurking, as is that of humour. Chaucer cannot bear with the pedantry of logic or "rhetorick"; he forestalls Rabelais in his poking fun at scholastic thought or speech. Hardly any text is ever quoted in the "Canterbury Tales," but with that intent. The tale of "Melibaeus, and even that of the Parson, are probably to be read in that light.

It might be useful, as it would not be uninteresting, to study Chaucer's humour under many more of its aspects; to point out, for instance, how wide its range is, from the finest, most delicate shades, and a spirit of nonchalant good-natured slyness which reminds one of La Fontaine, to brazen effects of effrontery, miracles of cheek, and downright jokes that resemble what is generally regarded as typical forms of American humour:

"But first,"

says the Miller,

> . . . "I make a protestacioun
> That I am dronke, I knowe it by my soun." [1]

Or this, of the "Doctor of Physick":

> "In al this world ne was ther noon him lyk
> To speke of phisik and of surgerye,
> For he was grounded in astronomye." . . .[2]

[1] Miller's Prologue, 29-30.
[2] Prologue, 412-14.

Even puns put in an occasional appearance.[1] The possibilities of under-statement, that ancient trick, are not ignored:

"If that he faught, and hadde the hyer hond,
By water he" (the Shipman) "sente them hoom to every lond." [2]

And as for the physician,

"His studie was but litel on the Bible." [3]

Enumeration, that besetting sin of mediaeval literature, is turned into a fresh source of comic effects by the use Chaucer makes of it. He will create a sense of mechanical and funny exaggeration through the mere virtue of a repetitive series, each term of which is in itself quite innocent:

"Wel knew he the olde Esculapius,
And Deiscorides, and eek Rufus,
Old Ypocras, Haly, and Galien,
Serapion, Razis, and Avicen;
Averrois, Damascien, and Constantyn,
Bernard, and Gatesden, and Gilbertyn." . . .[4]

One might instance as well the many distant places to which Chaucer's knight had been, and

[1] Somnour's Tale, 514 ("ars-metrik" and "arithmetic').
[2] Prologue, 399-400.
[3] 438.
[4] 429-34.

where he had fought, always with honour; a worthy man, and quite unable of a brag; but is not the soul of bragging, Chaucer hints, implicit in all the literature of knightly prowess? Was ever any record of valour *quite* truthful?

> "At Alisaundre he was, whan it was wonne. . . .
> In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
> No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
> In Gernade at the sege eek hadde he be
> Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye. . . .
> . . . This ilke worthy knight had been also
> Somtyme with the lord of Palatye
> Ageyn another hethen in Turkye:
> And evermore he hadde a sovereyn prys." [1]

Shall we not confess that a thrust is made here, behind an almost uncannily bland manner, at the most approved style of the romances, in which the palm of valour is won, with unfailing ease, by one hero after another?

Never was it more plain than in Chaucer's practice, that irony is not parted from humour, as a common opinion has it, by the whole distance between secret spite and charity; that irony is in fact a variety of humour, with a range of fine intermediary shades. The humorous intent, in the portraits of the parson and the ploughman, resides in the sheer idealism of such descriptions; it is no more here than the faintest

[1] Prologue, 51-67.

aroma, but its presence is felt nevertheless; to set up such figures as living facts is an irony in itself.

Conversely, the close relationship between humour and realism has been often emphasized, and we have taken it for granted. It is written large over the whole stretch of Chaucer's inspiration and art. But that the two artistic attitudes are after all distinct, and not in a constant proportion to each other, is no less plain. The passages and moments where realism is stressed, in the "Canterbury Tales," are often those where the humour recedes into the background; one purpose, growing more marked, may become exclusive of the other. The portraits of the somnour and the reve, for instance, are masterpieces of realistic intensity; but their sheer forcefulness makes them almost tragic.

What, however, would be the good of dealing with humour, if our subject did not teach us where to stop?

III

Is Chaucer's mastery of humour a pure gift of individuality? Or shall we trace it to some general influence; and in the latter case, with which of the major elements in fourteenth century England shall we connect it more largely: with the French strain of intellect, literature and art,

or with the English strain of shrewdness, instinct and concreteness?

That the miracle of personality has most to do with it, and that Chaucer's humour is primarily the exception of genius, it is safe to say. The conditions being what they were, the man might not have appeared who was fit to make the most of them. Still, a share must be granted to the "milieu"; and leaving out the question of actual causes and origins, it is at least important to try and determine which aspect of early English culture Chaucer's humour chiefly represents.

The evidence in favour of the French derivation and descent is impressive. It has been said, by an exceptionally keen critic, that Chaucer's very mind was French.[1] His "finesse" is indeed closer to that of the best mediaeval French authors than to any model in his own country. He displays an exquisite sense of measure and sobriety, qualities which the French taste was naturally hankering after and evolving, while they were abnormal in England, and very rarely to be found in whole works of art. His general discipleship to French literature is well established; from the special angle of humour, do not his poems evince an acquaintance with the fabliaux, and with at least English branches of the "Renard"; and did he not study—perhaps translate—the

[1] Emile Legouis, *Chaucer*, p. 49.

"Roman de la Rose," in which Jean de Meung had poured out the lavish flow of his satirical irony?

Chaucer's humour is certainly modelled to a large extent on the pattern of the "humour de finesse," which French literature had developed before him. He is the decisive, the supreme test of the bond of kinship between fourteenth century English culture and the older civilization of France; whatever that culture owed to that civilization, Chaucer exemplifies and illustrates to a signal degree. His humour is involved in that all but universal debt of his mental being; how could it not be, when it is only the subtle expression of that being itself? But just for the reason that Chaucer's humour is the essence of his personality, it would be wrong to say that it is French, because his personality, when all is considered, remains preeminently English.

The latest evidence has tended to weaken the reliance placed on such facts as the French origin of his surname.[1] As far back as one century and a half before the poet's birth—a much longer span than the time required for full actual naturalization—his stock appears as English. His heredity was normal in the middle class of a nation which was growing to the sense of its spiritual independence. His selection of the English

[1] J. M. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer*, 1926.

language as a medium points to a consciously national purpose. Machaut and the other French writers with whom he can be more especially connected in his lifetime could give him no humour, since they had none. Chaucer's humour developed with the maturity of his original powers; neither the French nor the Italian phase in his career had much to do with that development; his humour found itself gradually, but reached its full vigour in the last and supreme work where a purely English subject gave his art ample scope for the expression of English life and thought. The humour that is the highest distinction of the "Canterbury Tales" is the flower of Chaucer's self-realization as a national poet of England.

The matter and even the manner of his pleasantry are no doubt very often derived from France. But the temper of his humour, or of his method in handling those comic elements, and of his whole reaction to life, does not need to be explained by a fictitious French descent. There never was in France before Chaucer a humorist like him; there never was one in England either, but a deeper affinity to humour was in his time fast becoming a trait of the English character. He took many and invaluable lessons from his French masters; but in the field of humour, as in most other fields, he improved very much upon their example. The free use he made of broad

stories shows that there was in his constitution what is called a rather Gallic vein of frankness, with a touch of cynicism; but the same vein can be found in the most distinctly English literature, down to the eighteenth century, and beyond; Victorian reticence is after all an exception. The sap of rich realism and supple shrewdness which nourished his humour was of native racy flow. He announces the breadth of the Elizabethan drama and the subtlety of modern English humorists, much more than he does stand as an heir and disciple to Jean de Meung, or Eustache Deschamps. Not only through his more vigorous intuition of the virtue that resides in concreteness, through his wonderful sense of life, but through his humanity and his genial tone of feeling, he is as a humorist in line with his English successors, not with his French predecessors. It is assuredly a fallacy to say that humour implies an element of tenderness or love; the association is perhaps a sentimental illusion of critics, chiefly English; but that the ring of Chaucer's humour was English in its predominantly sympathetic note, who could deny?

Altogether original, raising the fabric of his personality upon the very suggestions and data which he made his own, Chaucer is a national writer, though one in whom the French affinities of the English genius are seen most strongly and

widely.[1] Solitary in his greatness, he stands apart from his contemporaries, and above them—how much apart and above as a humorist, the story of the next century and a half will show.

[1] When all is said, Chaucer bears witness to the still profoundly cosmopolitan spirit of the fourteenth century. The question whether his art and mind are more English or more French should not be pressed too far, as it is almost an artificial issue.

V: ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH HUMOUR AFTER CHAUCER

To PURSUE the history of English humour further than Chaucer's time, and only as far as the beginning of the Renascence, is to face an almost unrelieved anti-climax. The end of the fourteenth, the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries can offer us nothing that compares with the "Canterbury Tales" in breadth, delicacy and subtlety of humorous art. Still, the logic of the subject has to be obeyed, and its demands are plain: in the field of humour, as in that of general thought, the Renascence is a decisive turn. There, if anywhere, a pause must be made. One step more, and we are caught in a fresh tangle of problems. It was during the Renascence that under the stimulus of a quickened consciousness, the self-realization of humour actually began, with the definite support of a name. So thorough was the process of reaction, that the new mental attitude could seem to bear but a slight indirect relation to the old. No progress is more complex and involved, than the one which from the age of Ben Jonson to that of

Addison and Sterne, refashioned English humour on a basis of individual expression. That is another stage in a long story, and one upon which we shall gather strength to venture next, unless the spirit of humour, which we have been rash enough to evoke, should intimate to us that it had rather be left in peace. Meanwhile this survey may well come to a close with the period, not barren but of relatively inferior fecundity, which preceded the new birth.

Chaucer was recognized in his own lifetime as the leading poet of the age; his most eminent contemporaries and successors professed admiring and respectful allegiance to him. But no one singled out the outstanding originality of his genius as a value worthy of praise or imitation.[1] The absence of a word to denote that special quality, and the dearth, for centuries, of minds that could equal Chaucer's advanced standpoint in the conscious sense of humour, are the main causes of that strange unresponsiveness. A few critics no doubt, among the earliest, though not earlier than the sixteenth century, mention his "pleasant vein" and his "delightsome mirth";

[1] Full light has been thrown upon the subject by Professor C. F. E. Spurgeon in *Chaucer devant la critique*, etc., 1911. Of special interest in this respect are pages 146-153 and 195-202 of her work. They remain to this day the most substantial contribution towards a study of English humour in its historical development.

but nothing more is meant here than a general or a common spirit of pleasantry. Indeed the broader aspects of the comedy in the *Canterbury Tales* could hardly pass unnoticed, even when they were not thought worthy of particular praise; but the finer and the properly humorous elements took much longer to be recognized. It was only in the eighteenth century that Chaucer's readers, then possessed of a name for the mental attitude of which he had been the first absolute example in English, awoke to his significance in that regard; and it was only after the middle of the nineteenth century that something like justice was meted out to his extraordinary achievement as a humorist.

In the age that saw the close of his career, and that which immediately followed it, the very writers who seem to us of greater interest with respect to the continuation of humour, did homage to him in curiously irrelevant ways. "Moral" Gower, in the first edition of his "Confessio Amantis," praised Chaucer as before all the poet of love. These are the words of Venus to the author:

> "And greet well Chaucer when you meet,
> As my disciple and my poet:
> For in the flower of his youth
> In sundry wise, as he well could,

Of ditties and of songs glad,
The which he for my sake made,
The land fulfilled is overall." [1]

With Hoccleve and Lydgate, discipleship to their master was a proud obligation. But how strangely do the stresses fall which they lay upon his features! Hoccleve in the "Regement of Princes" depicts a benign, almost an edifying Chaucer; and the image of his genuine benevolence is thus warped by its one-sidedness. Lydgate is better aware of the complex nature of his patron's genius, and mentions his "fresh comedies" no less than his "piteous tragedies"; but what shall we say to this summing up of the case? Chaucer has written poems

"Of great morality,
Some of disport, including great sentence." [2]

Among the Scottish poets, Henryson comes nearest to a perception of Chaucer's unique gift, since he pays him the compliment of linking up with his work a poem not unworthy of his humour, "The Testament of Cresseid." But the author of the "Kingis Quair" associates Chaucer with Gower:

"Unto the hymns of my masters dear,
Gower and Chaucer, that on the steps sat

[1] *Confessio Amantis,* Selections, edited by G. C. Macaulay, 2,940 sqq.
[2] *Fall of Princes,* I, 246-47 and 344-45.

Of rhetoric, while they were living here,
Superlative as poets laureate
In morality and eloquence ornate,
I recommend my book in lines seven,
And eke their souls unto the bliss of heaven." [1]

And rhetoric is again the key-word of Dunbar's praise:

"O reverend Chaucer, rose of rhetorik all,
As in our tongue one flower imperial, . . .
Thou bearest of poets the prize royal." [2]

While good bishop Gavin Douglas follows suit: "venerable Chaucer" is a "heavenly trumpet," "in eloquence balmy,"

"Milky fountain, clear strand and rose royal
Of fresh invention." . . .[3]

No distinct perception appears to have dawned of the singularly keen, supple and profound spirit of humour through which Chaucer stands out, in single eminence, among his predecessors and contemporaries. And yet, the writers whose words have just been quoted, had all more or less a humorous strain in their constitutions. The sluggishness of their realization and response is

[1] *Kingis Quair*, stanza 197.
[2] *The Goldin Terge*, stanza xxix.
[3] *King Hart*, 7-12.

an illuminating fact, and one which, taken in conjunction with all the evidence that can be adduced from the literature and manners of that age, makes the issue quite clear.

The progress of English humour did not stop short at Chaucer. But it continued on another plane, and along rather different lines of development. Chaucer's creation in that field had not only been supreme; it had been exceedingly precocious, and exceptional in more respects than that of time. The intellectual detachment which it evinces betokened a maturity of reflection much beyond the stage which all but a very few minds of the period could reach. The playing with the shades of character and with the contrasted aspects of life in the master's works answered to a subtlety of thought and a clearness of artistic purpose which none in England had yet shown, or would show for a number of years. Moreover, the subtlety of Chaucer's humour was cast in a mould which, while it was not foreign, did not answer to the central and most normal type of English disposition and temperament. It embodied all the heritage of French "finesse" which the influence of an imported culture and a personal affinity of temper could make assimilable; it was as French as the genuine spontaneous activity of an English mind can be without ceasing to be English.

Too modern and clear-sighted, too subtle and conscious in its shading, too French in its slyness, Chaucer's humour was not only inimitable, it was at first almost unintelligible to vastly the greater number of his compatriots. It remained in abeyance as it were, enclosed in works whose fecundity was to be gradually released, as a potential treasure to be discovered by a distant posterity. Meanwhile the broader development of English humour went on as the growth of a mental gift which the English genius was putting forth from its instincts, and according to the dispositions that were its own. The lesson of Chaucer's example was for three centuries as if it had not been. On the basis of that meditative reserve and seriousness, and of that racy realism, which were the more special qualifications of the English for a restrained original tone in pleasantry, the vein of spontaneous humour which had been shown by the predecessors of Chaucer remained productive. Its fecundity seems but poor by the side of Chaucer's brilliant achievement; but it was nourished from the more average temper of the race, and its refining, when it was done, would be more genuine for not being too precocious. How that refining took place from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and how finally modern English humour grew upon a psychological root quite different from Chaucer's subtle intellectual an-

alysis, is a separate, and a difficult subject in itself. Over that prospect we may cast a tentative glance, and adumbrate its outline, before we have done.

II

Gower was Chaucer's contemporary, but died a few years after him, and may be regarded as the first of his successors. Standing by the side of his greater friend as a more average and representative figure, he is, however, curiously less alive to the national issue in language; the bulk of his French and Latin works exceeds that of his English poems. No fourteenth century writer was more steeped than Gower in the influence of France; but the grace of temperament was wanting, and he captured little from the more elusive values of the literature and the spirit which he studied. Whatever humour he possessed was not of the kind which French examples could have encouraged. That very much, in that line, should not be expected from him, how could one doubt, as soon as one reads his own account of the plan and object of his Trilogy:

"Since every man is bound to impart to others in proportion as he has himself received from God, John Gower, desiring in some measure to lighten the account of his stewardship, while yet there is time, with regard to those

mental gifts which God gave him, amid his labours and in his leisure composed three books for the information and instruction of others, in the form which follows." . . .[1]

That solemn didacticism was the common attitude of the Middle Ages, and Gower fulfils his pledge to the letter. We read the first hundred lines of his best work, the "Confessio Amantis," with a sense of thickening despair; the agility of mind, the self-detachment that humour implies, cannot possibly live in that clumsy, explicit heaviness of purpose, thought, and style. But what is this? Has not the glimmer of a twinkle stirred in those dull eyes?

> "For often, if one heed but took,
> It's better to wink than to look.[2]

as the fate of Actaeon testifies. . . . We read on: the sins of hearing are discussed after those of sight, and we relapse into downright moralizing. Gradually, however, there steals into us a fuller sense of the habit and demeanour of the mind that is thinking aloud in our hearing. Worthy John Gower is no humorist; still, he is not quite the pedant and the preacher; there is in him a fund of observation and shrewdness, and he can see the

[1] Translated from the Latin by G. C. Macaulay, in Selections from the *Confessio Amantis*, p. xi-xii.

[2] Book I, 383-84.

other side of a subject; more than that, he can hint at it, and his plain tone then tingles with a sort of subdued liveliness. There is a piquancy in the neat wording of his wisdom; and much will be forgiven him, because he knows how to smile at himself. The advice which in the poem Venus gives the grey-haired author lacks Chaucer's dexterous light touch; but shall we deny it a pleasant turn of sincerity, mixed with wistfulness, and that reserve of statement, which is the soul of humorous expression?

> "My son, if thou be well advised,
> This toucheth thee; forget it not:
> The thing is turned into: "it was";
> That which was of yore green grass
> Is withered hay by this time.
> Therefore my counsel is that thou
> Remember well that thou art old." . . .[1]

Against him should be reckoned the many occasions when his theme gave him a chance, and which he let slip by. But what then? He was not out to improve those opportunities. And there was in him that seriousness of intent, that genuine preoccupation with moral issues, which are the bent of the Puritan. The background of reflection upon life, and of sober sadness, is there; the man, and the writer, are of the type that

[1] Book VIII, 2433-39.

grows and flourishes most naturally in the England of the fourteenth, as in that of the nineteenth century. Does that background by itself, as we thought we could say it did, create a possibility, a potentiality of humour? It seems to do so really, and the test answers well enough in the case of Gower. Born as he was to be not merry, but grave, he is led by his meditative mood itself to a sense of interiority, a duality of mental planes; that things are relative and diverse he knows, since character and conduct are to be adapted to them as such; and withal, he has his share of the racy concrete perception which book knowledge may kill, but which the study of life nourisheth. As a result, he says not a few things, quietly, that mean more than they look on the surface. He is like that king of Hungary whom he mentions, and who:

> . . . "thought more than he said." [1]

That is but the initial, elementary stage of a progress which in Chaucer reaches its full consummation. But we are here nearer the central temperament of English humour.

With Hoccleve, the situation may well look even more desperate. In his "Regement of Princes," a personality is revealed: that of a man, like Gower, of a serious, moralizing turn, who

[1] Book I, 2106.

in the declining years of his life draws on his experience for the benefit of others. His words breathe the brooding sadness, almost the anxiety, of a pessimistic mood; and his utterance, sincere as it is, seems the naive outpouring of a primitive mind when compared with Chaucer's. His modesty outdoes that of his master, and runs to an awkward excess:

"I am as lewd" (ignorant) "and dull as is an ass." [1]

Shall we take him at his word? To do so would be imprudent. Hoccleve's naïvety is superb; but it cannot be as thorough as it appears, since he has such a shrewd eye for reality, and gives us such telling picturesque sketches of the manners of his time. Might there not be a touch of slyness in that intense presentment, the vividness of which the author seems hardly to feel, and which keeps on the same tenor unperturbed? We should be inclined to believe there might be, when in the praise of Chastity, we come across the episode of the Roman lady, whose husband had a bad breath, and who did not know that he had, as she lacked the necessary standards for comparison. . . . Does there not flit a passing light in the author's eyes, when he writes:

"Full few men had she kissed, as I guess."

[1] Ed. Furnivall, p. 139, stanza 552.

We think we see a wink, and are confirmed in our impression, as we read on:

> "To find many such is full difficult;
> Let us await well when the wind is south
> And north at once,"

before we look for them.[1] . . . Such moments are rare, and Hoccleve, assuredly, is no humorist. But he is not the dull ass he pretends to be. Everything points to the presence in him of a sort of virtual humour, made up of a pithy knowledge of things, just enough alive and conscious to be half "actualized" at times, but too much repressed by a heavy didacticism to become fully actual. . . . Common sense is another name for that humour in the rough, and the men who keep to that stage simply do not make us laugh; but they have in them the root of the matter, and from the root the flower some day will grow.

Lydgate introduces us to his "Fall of Princes" in words which hold out very little promise of better things. His aim, he says, is to survey the great catastrophes of fortune, "beginning at Adam and ending with King John taken prisoner in France by Prince Edward." [2] He claims to follow in Chaucer's footsteps; but alas, the difference to us! How light was the master's touch,

[1] P. 135, stanza 536.
[2] Book I, Prologue.

how ponderous is that of the disciple! How little he seems to have learnt of the virtue there is in leaving unsaid whatever one can spare to say! With him, we feel back in the Middle Ages again. . . . Still, Lydgate is not always painstakingly dull. It is not only that he will take a leaf out of Chaucer's book, and complain of the emptiness of his purse, or, like a thirsty monk, lament the drying up of Bacchus's fountains, whence inspiration used to flow; there seems to have been not a little truth of fact in those complainings, and the truth somehow interferes with the humour. His self-depreciation, again, on the ground of dullness, compares unfavourably with Chaucer's, as there speaks in it, or we are tempted to hear, the accent of genuine modesty, which while it redounds to the credit of Lydgate's character, does not further such humorous purpose as he may have had. . . . But in his earlier works, "The Temple of Glass," "Reason and Sensuality," there does arise a certain liveliness from the freer play of a more spontaneous fancy—as in the dialogue between the author and Diana, and the chaste Goddess's vivacious realistic fault-finding with Venus.[1] A faint glimmer we have here at best, just enough to feel sure that under the mediocrity of an all-too plain meaning, a current of virtual humour has not ceased to flow. And as Lydgate in other

[1] *Reason and Sensuality*, 3315 sqq.

respects is typically English, with a love for nature, a reverence for woman, a vein of national feeling, there is in him, altogether, a representative quality, which may explain the high esteem in which he has been held by good judges of their own literature. No doubt, he is a fair specimen of the early fifteenth century Englishman; and it must be confessed that if there is in him the matter of shrewdness, the fit manner to set it off is singularly lacking.

III

From England, indeed, the main stream of literary humour seems then to have passed into Scotland. It was North of the Tweed that poetry and the arts flourished most brilliantly at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries. Through their intellectual vigour and gift of telling expression, Henryson and Dunbar are Chaucer's most worthy successors, as the "Kingis Quair" is unmatched in the South for its lyrical fervour and charm.

Is there a distinctive quality in Scottish humour? Of course there is. The Scots themselves are positive on the point, and they have some right to be heard; as have assuredly, on their respective grounds, the Welsh and the Irish. But the trouble begins, when that special flavour is to be described.

You must not ask each people to justify their claim; they will be content with pointing out that theirs is "good" or "genuine" humour; conversely you must not ask them as to the value of their neighbours' brand: they are no less ready with a triumphant answer that it is bad. For example, the English have it that Scottish humour is of the broadest kind. Dunbar and the writers we are coming to would certainly seem not to clash with that verdict; but can anything be more broad than the popular English tales and fabliaux of the fifteenth century? The Scotsman's view as to the English is no less definite, since the Southron, he holds, has no humour at all. The post-Chaucerian period is not such as to make that opinion glaringly untenable; but the rest of the world, on the evidence of other ages, persists in crediting England with a creative faculty in the field of humour, and even merges the separate claims of Scotland and Wales in that of the larger unit. Indeed the national aroma of humour is like the specific smells which every one will agree upon within the herd or the tribe, and no one will agree upon without. Our first or second cousins are not in that respect much nearer to us than distant races. If we are to believe the citizen of New York, the Londoner is proudly and sluggishly humourless; but listen to John Bull, and hear what *he* has to say on the subject

of American pleasantry. . . . Humour no doubt being intimately bound up with national character, that character must be felt in the inner determinations of humour; but this holds only of its finer and more subtle shades; the form, the essential trick of the humorist, is roughly speaking much the same everywhere. It would be tempting to try and study the special dosing of elements which gives some substance to the claim of absolute originality each British group will put forward in that domain; but the research would be most difficult, the matter being most elusive; and perhaps a foreign observer may be excused if he goes by the opinion of the world in general. The world, which has digested the separate individualities of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and has learnt to speak of Great Britain, insists on speaking, as do the British themselves, of the English language and literature; and since our enquiry bears almost exclusively on literary expression, we may have some reason for keeping to our ready-made label of "English humour."

All the greater Scottish poets of the period we deal with are under the spell of Chaucer's influence. But in a most remarkable way, they are not indebted to Chaucer for their humour. This is a native growth, racy of the soil, and the vein of which, with them, answers to the more popular tone of their inspiration. To the English master

they go for the example of the conscious art and dramatic management in which his practice is so easily superior to that of his time. As was pointed out above, they seem hardly to be aware of his most original merit.

Henryson, when all is considered, is not an exception. Through the depth, the meditative quality, the background of his humour, he is the only writer of the age who can be mentioned in the same breath with Chaucer; but however large his debt to him, he owes more to himself, and to Scotland. Inferior in delicacy, subtlety, suppleness, and in the range of humorous expression, he is perhaps superior in one respect—that of the sense of tragic irony which instills such a modern and romantic flavour into the philosophical bitterness of his greatest poem. Some of his traits and hints display an almost Chaucerian slyness; but the spirit of humour with Henryson is fed by a more concentrated purpose of moral reflection; it is nearer the normal temper of the British mind. A thoughtful pessimism in the "Testament of Cresseid" sustains the vigorous movement of the firm, full, grand style. Such are the theme and the mood, that the tone of the piece must be mainly pathetic and instructive. It is not of the "Canterbury Tales" that we think here, but of William Hogarth, and his "Progresses."

Nearer than Chaucer to the popular heart as he is in his most elaborate poem, Henryson shows a closer sympathy with the instinct of rough merry-making in the huge irrepressible fun of "Sum Practysis of Medecyne." Chaucer's fabliaux seem tame by the side of that Rabelaisian outburst, where the coarser realism of a more primitive and Northern culture pours itself out. But Henryson has a vein as well of a finer and gentler kind: "The Garment of Good Ladies," "The Reasoning between Age and Youth," "Robyn and Makyne," the "Fables," etc.; here, the neat nimble cleverness of Chaucer's manner is often caught. A deft point is made out of the experience of the lover who did not catch the tide of opportunity:

> "The man that will not when he may
> Shall have not when he would." . . .[1]

With Dunbar, we revert to the characteristically broad vein that does appear to be, at least in older Scotland, the national brand of humour. Our poet's comic verve rushes forward with such impetuosity, that one might expect to see him swept off his feet by the torrent which he has let loose. Nothing can exceed the Rabelaisian gusto with which the "Two Married Women and the

[1] Robyn and Makyne, 91-92.

Widow" converse on the theme of their conjugal experiences. We have here, of course, a quality of temperament, an individual gift, the gushing invention of impudently realistic fun. There is a genius in that, the genius of popular raciness. But however racy, a manner is not necessarily humorous. A fishwoman's hot argument with a customer is a pleasure for the gods; but in order that humour, properly so called, be injected into the rich mixture, the lady must be able to control her fury and her glibness of tongue with a sense, however relative, of artistic restraint. The originality of Dunbar resides in the remarkable self-possession of his most fiery invectives. He keeps a cool head, and a clear judgment, all the time. Everything is explicit in the "Two Married Women," no doubt; but that's just it: more is explicit than there ever was in actual talk, or in actual life; what we have here is the poetry of exaggeration, and that over-statement which is similar, in most respects, to the opposite process of under-statement. The humour that mixes with the farce lies in the fantastic and pretended unawareness, on the author's part, of the wild improbability of his own tale; and in other elements, such as the amazing wealth of picturesque words, or the grotesque impudence of the indecency. The final effect is very amusing and high-flavoured; but the colourful episode does not eclipse

the much more finely shaded art of Chaucer in the character of the Wife of Bath.

Dunbar's manner is mostly of that type; on occasion it is touched with a more subtle essence; but the grim physical horror, symbolizing moral corruption, that rises to a powerful effectiveness in "The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis," tends to replace and dispel the humour altogether. Here again, as in Henryson's "Testament of Cresseid," we are come down to the bedrock of moral faith and the sense of sin. The poet is so clearly aware of it, that at the end, with a masterly skill, he shifts us back into humour at one stroke: Mahoun (or Mahomet, the Devil), to crown the doings of the day, has wished for a "Highland pageant"; and a messenger fiend, shouting the war-cry of the clans, has soon gathered about him a crowd of harsh-voiced Highlanders:

> "Those termagants, in rags and tatter,
> Full loud in Gaelic began to clatter,
> And croak like raven and rook;
> The Devil so deafened was with their yell,
> That in the deepest pit of hell
> He smothered them with smoke." [1]

The best-known pieces in that style—as the one called for short "The Tournament," "The

[1] The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis; the end.

Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy," "The Feigned Friar of Tungland," etc., stir up much the same kind of interest and humour. There is still a beautiful central calm in the mind of the poet, amid a stormy whirl of tremendous abuse; but when all is said, the range is not very wide, nor is the humour of the finest. Release is the label that would best cover most of that brand; and it was to be Rabelais' privilege to endow release with a rich mental background. Great as Dunbar is undoubtedly in his satire, his method as a comic writer is too explicit. He is the first to hold his sides, and that is not the most approved method of humour:

> "Such comfort to my heart it wrought,
> With laughter near I burst." [1]

Not the least efficient of his characteristics, on the contrary, is his wonderful talent for writing in verse; all along, the metric regularity and brilliancy of the stanza underlines, confirms the sense of a measured and deliberate expression. That such scurrilous matter should be put into those correct, neat, inevitable lines, greatly furthers our impression of a conscious purpose, and of humour.

After Dunbar, Scottish poetry loses much of

[1] The Justis betwix the Talzeour and the Sowtar, 101-102.

its very high quality; the work of Bishop Gavin Douglas shows a falling off in vigour, as it is animated no doubt by a more gentle spirit. Humour with him is most often a pleasant gleam, that lights up the moralizing and the allegory of his verse. The poet in the "Palace of Honour" meets Diana hunting with the virgins of her train:

> . . . "but few I saw with Dian hunt." [1]

He is arraigned before Venus: has he not sung a ballad on the evil doings of false love? The worthy bishop, in that embarrassing predicament, turns his knowledge of law to good use:

> "Madam, ye may not sit into this case,
> For ladies may be judges in no place." [2]

Besides, he is a "spiritual man," and must be tried by his own ecclesiastical court. . . . The hero of "King Hart," being wounded with an arrow, is handed over to Dame Beauty, to have his wound dressed; but the more she tries to cure it, the worse it becomes. . . . These are innocent pieces of slyness, not very original indeed, but genuine; and they suit well the temper of the man; their gentleness is a relief, after the crude force of so much stronger verve. "King Hart," as a whole,

[1] *Poetical Works*, ed. J. Small; p. 14, l. 26-27.
[2] Ibid., p. 27, l. 17-18.

is an arresting poem, in which the mood of reflective detachment, not unmixed with a mild playfulness, is closely akin to the essence of much modern humour, without perhaps freeing itself quite enough from a didactic intent to allow of a thorough identification.

A vigorous irony is once more to be tasted in the earnest heavy poems of David Lyndsay, who one century and a half after William Langland gave a Scottish counterpart to "Piers Plowman" in his character of John the Common Weal (The Satire of the Thrie Estaitis). But Lyndsay's satirical animus is instinct with the spirit of the Reformation, and he belongs already to the new age.

We find ourselves on English soil again with the work of Skelton; and we are reminded once more of the danger that lurks in too definite views of national characteristics; if Scottish humour was often broad, what shall we say to Skelton's? But the vitality of his verve is not even second to Dunbar's. The animation, the flow of spirits, that put life into all that he writes, have their source in the liveliness of a fancy brimful with the fun of things. Not the most philosophical, not the most refined fun, certainly. Our poet finds his delight in all the wide range of easy amusement, from pure farce to jolly satire and self-mockery. The rhythm of his mirth is insep-

arably mingled with the skipping measure of his most typical lines, in which the nimbleness of quick, flashing, prancing thoughts is invested with the ironical jingle of sonorous, almost macaronic rhymes. To write verse in that style is to laugh at one's reader and at one's self; and the humour of the laugh is that it should be associated at all with the dignified garb of poetry. This contrast, this paradox, is the essence of Skelton's art; and the soul of burlesque is diffused through all his work—as the free paganism of the jolly priest was the triumphant humour of his life. Do we not breathe the flavour of parody in that strangest paraphrase of Catullus' elegy, the "Book of Philip Sparrow"?

"When I remember again
How my Philip was slain,
Never half the pain
Was between you twain,
Pyramus and Thesbe,
As then befell to me:
I wept and I wailed,
The tears down hailed;
But nothing it availed
To call Philip again,
Whom Gyb our cat hath slain. . . .
I sighed and I sobbed,
For that I was robbed
Of my sparrow's life.
O maiden, widow and wife,

Of what estate ye be,
Of high or low degree,
Great sorrow then ye might see,
And learn to weep at me!
Such pains did me fret,
That mine heart did beat,
My visage pale and dead,
Wan, and blue as lead;
The pangs of hateful death
Well-nigh had stopped my breath."[1]

And is not the enthusiastic rapturous realism of that most extraordinary paean of praise, "The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummyng," a skit upon the fossilized traditional language in which the courtly poets would describe the lady of their love?

But that the joy of picturesqueness, the pleasure there is in striking outline and character, could raise Skelton's realism, and his humour, to a higher plane of artistic intensity, who could doubt, who knew for instance the portrait of Riot, in "The Bowge of Courte"?

IV

We thus bring our survey to a close on the eve of the Reformation and the Renascence. From Chaucer's exquisite delicacy and subtlety, we

[1] Chalmers, *English Poets*, vol. II, p. 290.

have dropped to a more modest level of vivacious, broad and fanciful realism. But this was the solid level on which English humour could spontaneously develop; there it was founded in the wide instincts and temperament of the people.

Literature, properly so called, is the best, the safest index to the development which we have attempted to follow. Had it been possible to extend our study beyond its moderate limits, confirmation might have been sought for the views presented above in evidence of a more or less different kind. As soon as the spiritual life of the English people is tested in its various aspects, from the end of the fourteenth to the middle of the sixteenth centuries, it can be easily understood how and why the period which followed Chaucer's death was not indeed one of actual decay in the domain of humour. Documents of all kinds about that relatively modern period are more numerous; and from two classes of them in particular some idea may be formed of the part which a taste for the comic was playing in the everyday thoughts of the nation. One is the outpouring of the common mind in "humorous" pieces, and in the ballads [1]—those creations, not

[1] For the humorous pieces, see the list in J. E. Wells, *Manual of Writings in Middle English*, p. 180 (the list covers the period later than 1400). See as well Schofield, *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer* (p. 323-35 (remarks are made on the period

of the crowd, but of the popular singers, the heritage of several centuries, but in which the fifteenth can perhaps claim the largest share. The other is the carvings, full of a grotesque fancy, which we notice in the cathedrals and churches of the time.

If our notion of humour were of the looser and freer sort, such documents would have been to us of a significance not second to that of the major writers. But we have committed ourselves to a stricter notion, and the element of implicitness in pleasantry is a condition of the mental attitude which it is our object to trace. Now, that implicitness is rather an attribute of reflective thinking, and hardly to be found in the forms of expression that leave only very little to the interpretation of the reader or spectator. It is a fact that the comic verve which gives itself vent in the ballads or the church carvings is very generally too explicit to afford us direct evidence of the presence and activity of the proper spirit of humour.

What those documents should encourage is the

from Chaucer's death to the Renascence); and G. H. MacKnight, *Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse*.—For the ballads, see F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Boston 1882-1898; e.g. in Part IX (numbers 266-305): King Edward the Fourth and a Tanner of Tamworth (273), Our Goodman (274), The Friar in the Well (276), The Wife Wrapt in Wether's Skin (277), The Farmer's Curst Wife (278), The Jolly Beggars (279), The Keach in the Creel (281), etc.

impression that the life of the English people, after all, was normal, as measured by the standards of balanced human feelings everywhere. The already prevalent tone of seriousness or even sadness which the foreigner would notice should be interpreted in the light of those qualifying facts. The character of the English nation had by that time developed most of its ripe and modern features. The gravity and even moroseness would strike the observers from abroad; but the English who drank their wine in a silence which the French visitor naturally regarded as gloomy [1] had bright patches of mirth in the piebald cloak of their moods; they could be rowdy, or blithe, their spirits would at times be exuberant, they knew how to crack jokes, and spring a heavy, or a jolly laugh. The note of merry England is still part and parcel of the tones of those centuries. The latent disposition to humour had its roots in that com-

[1] The words of Deslandes, a Frenchman who travelled in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century, are typical of the remarks which many of his compatriots must have made before him: "Il n'est point à mon avis de spectacle plus comique que celui de quinze ou seize bouveurs qui s'enivrent posément. . . . Des personnes austères, avec un maintien affecté et des manières pesantes, passent douze heures de suite sans se dire un seul mot. Les bouteilles se succédent les unes aux autres, et elles ont une éloquence naturelle qui persuade les convives. Il n'est point besoin de les exciter au plaisir; une résolution ferme de s'enivrer est le motif gracieux qui les anime." (P. 251; the relation of Deslandes was published in 1717.) We are indebted for this quotation to the forthcoming (second) volume of M. G. Ascoli's work.

plex mingling of a sober pensiveness with shrewd and lighter-hearted impulses.

The day was to come, when the original temper of the English would express itself more fully in an original manner of stressing the contrasts of life. But the necessary mental preparation had not yet reached a sufficiently advanced stage. Humour in its indubitable, complete state, was yet the privilege of a minority; the instances of its finished perfection were very few. Time was needed to make the attitude quite self-conscious, and bring it within the reach of many, though not of all minds. To this decisive growth, the Renascence and the Reformation were equally to contribute; both stimulated the initiative and self-reliance of the individual man. Under their combined influences, the vitality of the humorous instinct was spurred from a dormant to an active state; the affinities of natural genius which were to give England a primacy in that field were revealed and confirmed. For the fulfilment of that destiny, it was indispensable that the English temperament and the higher method of humour should be reconciled as it were in a mutual adaptation. Chaucer's art was not the pattern after which the adaptation could be generally effected; and modern humour was recreated on the basis of a psychological tendency that answered to the most typical feature of the English mind: its

stubborn individuality. Such was the main issue in the next period—that in which Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Sir Thomas Browne, Burton, Samuel Butler, Shadwell, Congreve, were the outstanding figures; and when a word, which originally denoted a passive bent of temper, most alien to the supple detachment of the humorist, went through one of the most fascinating transformations in the history of language, growing to mean the very thing which it would have seemed least fitted to imply.

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